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THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

# PROUDHON

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# PROUDHON

## CHAPTER I

### THE EDUCATION OF PROUDHON

PIERRE-JOSEPH PROUDHON was born on the 15th of January, 1809, and thus grew up in the shadow of two great events, the French and the industrial revolutions; both of these he felt profoundly; the first of them he understood. He was born in Battant, a suburb of Besançon, the capital of the Free County of Burgundy, and his intense local patriotism remained a living force in his life and thought to the day of his death. His 'little country', Franche-Comté, had only been part of France for one hundred and fifty years when Proudhon was born; Besançon was a real local capital, and some of the seeds of Proudhon's federalism, of his dislike of Paris, and of centralisation, were sown in those early years. He was a citizen of no mean city, a child of no mere department; and, whether he was defending the intellectual independence of the County of Burgundy against the pretensions of the Duchy of Burgundy, or looking forward with delight to the reconstitution of the thirty submerged nationalities which he believed existed in France, he was fighting, not merely for a general principle, but for the memories and loyalties of his youth.

More important still was his parentage. 'My ancestors on both sides were free peasants, exempt from feudal servitude from time immemorial'; there remained to Proudhon all his life a family pride as great as that of a Guermantes; he was born of no proletarian or servile stock. Had not his maternal grandfather, the old soldier, withstood before the revolution the local tyrannical squire, and was not his mother 'noted for her virtues and for her republican ideas'? 'This is real nobility of race. I myself am a noble.' His father's family, the Proudhons, was noted for obstinacy; one branch had risen in the world, had entered the middle classes and produced an eminent lawyer, but the poorer connections were far from playing the rôle of poor relations; they had their share of the pride, that was to be so marked in their most famous kinsman. Proudhon's father was a cooper and, for a time, a brewer. He was, doubtless, an honest and industrious man, but unsuccessful in his business. Later, Proudhon attributed his father's financial disasters to his incorrigible habit of selling his beer at the 'just price', that is, at the cost of production, instead of imitating the rest of the brewers who sold at a profit. Not only that, the elder Proudhon was careful about the character of his customers, and so lost money by refusing to let women enter his shop. Others were not so scrupulous, and 'having grown rich by prostitution . . . married their children off to the best people, while my father's children have found nobody'. The lesson learned here was never forgotten; there was a morally right way of doing business; there was a morally wrong way of doing business; but in modern society the right way

led straight to bankruptcy, the wrong way to wealth and honour. Society must be made safe for honesty and a world be created in which the children of an honest man like Claude-François Proudhon should not be embittered by having to pay the price of their father's honesty in hunger and humiliation.

Although Proudhon considered himself a native of Besançon, the suburb where he was born, preserved, as M. Daniel Halévy tells us, a rural character. 'Many market-gardeners, peasants, wine-growers, found it convenient to lodge there, not far from the city-folk. Thus they could make their living without changing their way of life, keeping faithfully, in the shadow of the town, to their rural customs and their rural speech.' This, again, was of great importance to Proudhon, for he learned to know and sympathise with the peasants, to feel with the peasants in his heart, to share their land-hunger; their rigid views of right-living; their deep conservatism; all combined with their passion for equality; their class-consciousness; and their savage resolution to be each master of his own fields and his own household.

Not only did Proudhon know the peasant life; he lived it. Until he was twelve, he was constantly engaged in farm-work, especially in herding cattle, and late in life, he declared that there, in the grass, looking at the sky, he learned un-Christian lessons of trust in nature, and distrust of 'that absurd spiritualism which is at the basis of Christian life and education'. When he had become a famous antagonist of the Church, both he and his enemies were inclined to exaggerate the heresies of his childhood; and one pious antagonist declared that prayer

found no echo in the Proudhon household. It was never safe to assume anything about Proudhon, and he was indignant at this charge, for he was, in fact, brought up in matter-of-fact orthodoxy by his parents. They were good Catholics of the old French peasant school and so was their son. He believed in God and the saints; he also believed in nymphs and fairies.

Proudhon owed his chance of formal education to the Abbé Sirebon, the parish priest, next, to his father's employer, but, above all, to his mother, Catherine, who was the mainstay of the poor household. The Proudhons were going down in the world. Claude-François was no longer his own master, the future was dark, but the boy was to be given his chance. The entry to the local college (high school) was the greatest event of Proudhon's youth; more important than the siege of Besançon, than his father's failure, than the birth of a younger brother. He now learned of delights as keen as any he had known as a herd-boy; he displayed the prodigious industry that was to remain with him all his life — and an appetite for learning that startled his teachers. But he studied under great difficulties; his family was desperately poor, and he had to borrow school books from more fortunate boys; he had no hat; he wore wooden shoes; and he learned the truth of the local proverb, 'Poverty is no crime; it is worse.'

The studies were almost entirely mathematics and Latin. He was a poor mathematician (and that is worth remembering), but he was an excellent Latinist. He mastered the language and shone in it and, until his death, language fascinated him. He

won prizes and one of them was Fénélon's *Demonstration of the Existence of God*. He read it, and it shook his faith. 'After that,' he said, 'I was a metaphysician' – a belief which M. Daniel Halévy notes, was an illusion.

His school life was difficult, and its difficulties nourished his sombre pride; he was religious, but he saw, or thought he saw, that his zeal was ill-rewarded, that the Church was a respecter of persons. When he was sixteen he abandoned the practice of his religion, although he was to return to it again. The family fortunes grew worse and worse. On the day he was to receive a prize, there was no one of his family present, and the presiding official had to take the place of the missing kinsfolk. He went home to find his father in consternation, his mother in tears; a lawsuit had ended in a decision against his father. 'That evening we supped on bread and water.' The strain on the family resources of keeping Pierre-Joseph at school was unbearable. '"At eighteen," said his father, "I earned my keep and I hadn't had so long an apprenticeship" – "I thought he was right." What trade to adopt was now the question? If he could have got access to the land, he might have become a farmer, but the want of capital barred that road. 'Perhaps it was only the want of a good organisation of rural credit that kept me from remaining all my life a peasant and a conservative.' Another lesson, the exclusion of the poor from property and independence, was now learned.

The trade chosen was printing, and he never forgot the lessons he learned in his apprenticeship. He was proud to have a trade and believed that it was a sure

shield against want, that he was now independent of everybody. He also became convinced that the competent artisan received a more fruitful training than the bookworm; and he was always irritated by the claims of an intellectual élite to lead the workers for their own good. His conviction of the necessity, and the possibility, of equality was given a secure basis in his mind by his memories of the printer's chapel. He learned the force of trade practice, of the way in which a customary code can keep the sluggards up to the mark and prevent the strong from racing ahead too fast. He learned a trade morality, and the need for and the possibility of mutual loyalty. He never lost the conviction that he knew the minds, the needs, the natures of the workers, and of the peasants, as no academics, fortified with formal doctrine, could know them. The workers never became for him a homogeneous class of which any thousand were worth any other thousand; their salvation *must* come from within. Any leadership from the outside, no matter what were its claims to superior knowledge or disinterestedness, was simply another form of tyranny. There were more modes of exploitation than those created by formal property relations.

Besides learning his trade he fell in love, violently, as he was never to fall in love again, and he returned to his religion with a passionate enthusiasm. The work of the printing-shop was largely concerned with theology; Proudhon read widely in the fathers of the Church as well as more in modern writers. He thought of himself as an apologist for the faith, for if he was already suspicious of the political side of Catholicism, his faith in the theory, if not in the

practice, of the Church was still warm. Already he was perplexed by the problem of inequality, of worldly injustice. Was the Church right, was there no remedy for these evils in this world, or was it possible to organise society on new lines, to harmonise the desires and passions of men? Was man the maimed creature, marked by original sin as the Church described him, or was the escape from his prison house in his own hands once he found the key? He was tempted by the heresy of Socinianism, by the denial of original sin. He was unwittingly on his way out of the Church and on to another faith.

He was now a proof-reader and, through his corrections of a Latin *Lives of the Saints*, he made the acquaintance and won the friendship of its young editor, Gustave Fallot, destined to be the first great personal influence in Proudhon's life. Fallot was, or hoped to be, a philologist; he infected Proudhon with his enthusiasm, an enthusiasm which, with Proudhon, took the form of learning Hebrew. This study left permanent marks on his mind. He retained to his death what was, for a Frenchman, an astonishing familiarity with the Bible. It was a weapon of fact, of argument, of rhetorical appeal, and he ranked it with Adam Smith and Hegel among the three sources of his ideas. Not only the Bible, but philology attracted him. It is hard to realise now the prestige of philological studies in that age; new vistas were opened up by it, vistas not only in the history of language, but in the general history of mankind. It was a clue to the nature of things which, if strenuously held to, would lead its owner into the heart of the labyrinth where lay the secret of human

misery to be remedied by the application of the true laws of man's nature, laws which language could illuminate. This illusion, that linguistic knowledge was the key to all or to most problems, never wholly left Proudhon. It, as much as any borrowed dialectic, was his method of research and of argument. On the whole, this belief did him harm. It is worth saying once that the Hebrew text of the commandment does not say 'Thou shalt not steal', but 'Thou shalt not put aside', but *Lo thignob* recurs too often, not as an illustration, but as an argument. Again and again arguments are interrupted or eloquence is allowed to cool off, while the etymology of a word is pursued through bold and often erroneous guesses. It is not of first-class importance to know (or to think you know) that all the world is wrong in believing that *religio* at bottom means binding, when it really means bending. In any case, even if philology had been as powerful and adequate a weapon as Proudhon thought, he was unfitted to use it. He knew a good deal of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, but he knew nothing of *language*, or nothing to the point. He pained friends, who knew better, by his bold guesses. He had neither the scholar's equipment nor temperament. Words had the meanings Proudhon wanted them to have, and if modern philology gave him no support, so much the worse for it! It is in vain that his patient friend, Professor Bergmann, tries to tame him; the bee keeps buzzing in the bonnet. He had valid reasons for disliking Renan's methods, but, in any case, the professional superiority of Renan in philological equipment would have made Proudhon suspicious of his rival author of a *Life of Jesus*.

Another key to knowledge of society was now put into his hands, for a fellow-citizen of Franche-Comté, just becoming famous, had his book printed at Besançon. The book was *The New Industrial World* of Charles Fourier, and it helped to open the world of economic speculation to the young proof-corrector. Later in life Proudhon, as was his wont, was less and less willing to admit his debt to Fourier, especially as he got to be on worse and worse terms with Fourier's disciples, but the influence was great. It is most obvious in the first edition of the *Creation of Order in Humanity*, where the system of series is made to do all sorts of wonders, but this was chiefly a matter of words. But Fourier's scepticism of the state, his view that the social revolution could be brought about *within* the existing society by setting an example of a more efficient economy (the Phalanstery) has points of affinity with the later anarchical doctrines of Proudhon, although the effect of the example given in Proudhon's system is moral, not economic. Proudhon admitted six weeks of infatuation with Fourier, but the influence lasted longer than that. Proudhon came to scorn all 'Utopias' as Marx did; the optimism of Saint-Simon, of Cabet, and of the Fourierists infuriated him; all these promises of increased wealth to be generally distributed by ingenious manipulations, by improved productive methods, were deceit in his eyes, for the best that could be hoped for was decent poverty for everyone, instead of wealth for some and wretchedness for the rest. It is a source of his strength that the satisfactions he promises his disciples are moral rather than material, but if he abandoned the

path opened by Fourier, he was for long enough in the debt of his fellow-countryman, and in his own later years he thought more kindly of the speculator whom he had been used to attack.

While this interior revolution was under way, an exterior revolution broke out. The 'three glorious days of July' (1830) overthrew the restored Bourbons and made it evident to the world that the revolutionary spirit was again on the march. That revolutionary spirit filled the mind and still more the heart of Proudhon. He never wavered in his belief that the French Revolution was a turning point in human history. That Revolution might be, for Marx, merely a triumph of the new capitalist over the old feudal order, but for Proudhon it was the beginning of the reign of Justice, or, at any rate, it made possible the institution of the reign of Justice. What the content of Justice was, in Proudhon's system, will be described later, but Proudhon never regretted for a moment the Revolution. He could be bitter about its betrayal by leaders who were heroes of the revolutionary legend, but whom he condemned for misunderstanding the great moment of deliverance, but none of his sneers at democracy and, still more, at democrats, can make of him (despite the ingenious special pleading of M. Louis Dimier) a 'master of the counter-revolution'. Nowhere more clearly than in Proudhon, can one feel the unshakable devotion of the French peasant and worker to the memory of those days 'when Death was on thy drums, Democracy, and, with one rush of slaves, the world was free'. Is a man, a book, a project, counter-revolutionary? It is thereby condemned. Does a law or an

idea seem to attempt to damn up the revolutionary flood; it is futile. The future is, *must* be with the Revolution: the old obedience to traditional authority, in politics and in religion, has received a mortal wound. Any society based on these ideas is bleeding to death; it may be bandaged up for a time, but the bleeding cannot be stopped. As much as Marx, Proudhon believed and preached the inevitable victory of his cause, the making of the world safe for the idea of Justice brought into it by the French Revolution. It is the theme of his greatest book, *Justice in the Revolution and the Church*. It shapes all his economic arguments, so that Walras is startled to find an economic doctrine refuted as being against the spirit of the Revolution. The Revolution, though side-tracked and betrayed, is ever on the march. Crises like 1830 and 1848 are bred by the instability of all institutions which do not frankly take as their base the revolutionary idea of Justice, that is to say, equality. There are now no authorities of tradition or of divine right; all such authorities died in 1789; although their rotting corpses may yet cumber the ground.

The immediate effect of the revolution of 1830 was not to provide Proudhon with a philosophy, but to deprive him of his job, for the upheaval was bad for business. Proudhon learned that even being master of a trade did not (as it should have done) guarantee a living. Fallot did his best for the friend to whom he predicted that 'you will be a writer, a philosopher, you will be one of the lights of the age . . . you cannot escape your destiny'. The destiny was still fugitive, however; a livelihood of any kind, as a teacher, as a

printer, was the first necessity. Fallot had an idea. Why not apply for the Suard Scholarship? It was tenable for three years; it was the very thing that would enable Proudhon to complete his education. But Proudhon was far less ambitious for himself than his friend was for him. At last he succumbed to Fallot's pleadings, to the offer to share their resources in Paris. He set off for the capital on foot; Paris did not please him, neither the place nor the people; and Fallot fell ill. He recovered, but Proudhon would not be a drag on his friend any longer; there was no work to be had in the city, so he set out, on foot, for the South, with £2 in his pocket.

He was, if not disappointed, for the moment at least, defeated; he was to be a worker, not a writer — and he was a worker without work. The times continued bad; the helplessness of the mere worker was taught to Proudhon. He arrived at Toulon with three and a half francs left; he found no work, but had he not a passport which promised help and protection? He applied to the mayor to give him work, and the mayor, one of the now triumphant bourgeoisie which the recent revolution had put into power, told him that he had misunderstood his passport; all he could claim was enough money to take him home. The official having failed, he appealed to the man; again he was repulsed. 'Very well,' I said between clenched teeth, 'I promise you to remember this interview.' And remember it he did, more than twenty years later when he told the story.

There was nothing for it but to return to Besançon, where his family had just lost the third son, called up to the army, which the sons of the prosperous

could escape by a money payment, and where Jean-Étienne was to die, another victim of society. For a brief moment Proudhon was editor of a new paper, an organ of 'advanced ideas'; but, in a day, he learned that the ideas must not be more advanced than those of the proprietor. The job was thrown up at once, and a lesson on the necessary compromises of party journalism taught – but not learned.

He worked for a while in the country at Arbois, aiding in a lawsuit against a great proprietor and drinking deeply at the popular traditions of the Revolution; and then returned to Besançon to work for his old employers as a proof-reader. He had £6 a month; it was wealth! Among his jobs was the seeing through the press of a Latin Bible – and of a new edition of the theological dictionary of Bergier. To the latter he owed much of that command of theological learning that made many think he had studied for the priesthood. It reinforced his contempt for vagueness or for compromise; between Catholicism and Atheism, or, as he was to insist, 'anti-theism', there is nothing that a sober man can rest on. There *must* be certainty, and one side or the other must be chosen. He hated the Church and many of its servants, but he never ceased to respect it; it was the greatest, most respectable of errors, not to be assailed with the feeble and corrupt methods of Voltaire – for although Voltaire was on the right side, the Bible and the Church were not to be replaced by the lewd jesting of *La Pucelle* or the sentimental religiosity of Rousseau.

Meantime, he attempted to escape from dependence, not by learning, but by his trade. He set up in

partnership as a printer. It was a moment of hope and joy; a short moment, for his friend Fallot died, his great schemes unfinished, and he had left his fame to Proudhon as a charge – and, indeed, if Fallot is at all remembered to-day, it is as one who helped Proudhon! But Proudhon's ambitions were not purely those of a printer; he had something to say; perhaps it was, as M. Daniel Halévy suggests, a way of carrying on Fallot's work. In any case, Proudhon began his first book, an essay in philology, the science whose possibilities had dazzled him when Fallot first displayed them before his eyes. In form, the book was an appendix to a philological essay of Bergier, but in essence it was the search after eternal truth by the road of language; the science of language will lead man to the truth he is made to know. The essay fell entirely flat; it did not bear Proudhon's name and, in any case, no one noticed it. As a serious study in philology it was worthless; Proudhon, like Bergier, lived in a world where modern scientific philology was unknown. Later, Proudhon recognised this, and was as scornful of his first efforts as any critic could desire. For the moment the lost chance of fame was less important than the decline of the printing business. Proudhon was repeating his father's experience, an effort to secure independence by hard work and honest dealing was proving fruitless. The death of his brother, of Fallot, the failure of his writings, of his business, all embittered him. He had dreamed of private vengeance, of the enforcement of justice, or, at least, the avenging of wrong by a secret court of honest men, only there were so few honest men! A hundred men in France

devoted to justice would suffice, but out of 34,000,000 where to find the hundred? And meanwhile, the prison-gates were again closing round him. He had failed to escape by his learning; he had failed, it appeared, to escape by his trade; he must resign himself to a life as the servant of others. Why?

There was a last chance open to find an answer to this problem, the Suard Scholarship. It was about to be offered by the Academy of Besançon; he would be a candidate, and in the meantime he had a job as proof-reader in Paris. This was a change from his last stay in the capital, a change for the better; but Fallot was dead and there was nothing in Paris to touch his heart, although he made a few new acquaintances, some of whom were in time to be friends.

Meanwhile, the negotiations and the necessary tactical moves in the campaign for the scholarship were under way. Proudhon had won respect for his character, and admiration for his talent, in Besançon, but he was not always a help to his sponsors. One of the electors (and he was no bad judge) thought highly of Proudhon's ability, but declared 'that fellow is bound to be a troublesome customer' – and refused to vote for him. Not only was Proudhon a rather intimidating candidate, but he had odd views of what he would do with the scholarship if he gained it. The Academy wanted its nominee to go to Paris and study in order that he might rise in the world. Proudhon wanted to stay on in Besançon; he would study, indeed, but he did not want to abandon his trade (he was more and more involved in the ill-fortune of his partners) and he did not want to rise in the world, for such an ambition was incompatible

with his new religion, that of equality. Despite his views he was chosen, being supported by 'all the most distinguished and influential members', notably by the Abbé Doney, who had been a disciple of Lamennais. Proudhon was still an amateur philologist, and he had sent in an essay for the Volney Prize, offered by the Institute of France. His *Researches on the Grammatical Categories and on some Origins of the French Language* got an honourable mention, and some of it appeared in a learned journal. This ended philology for Proudhon, but when he was famous, some enemies reprinted his *Appendix to Bergier*, to show that Proudhon was inconsistent or hypocritical, a malicious trick which infuriated him, and for which he blamed the Church.

Proudhon's project was ambitious enough. He proposed to write *Researches on Revelation, or Philosophy serving as an Introduction to Universal History*, a work designed to demonstrate that evangelical morality represented eternal truths lost to sight to-day. Evangelical truths soon lost their attraction for him, but the belief in eternal truths which he could demonstrate for the salvation of the world, remained a Proudhonian doctrine to the end.

The letter of application was equally characteristic. In the first draft, it contained a profession of faith which alarmed his cautious sponsor, Pérennès. 'Born and brought up in the working-class, belonging to it still, to-day, and for ever, by feelings, intellect and habits and, above all, by the community of interests and wishes' Proudhon promised, if chosen, to toil, 'by philosophy and science, with all the energy of his will and all the powers of his mind, towards

complete emancipation of his brothers and fellows'. Such a programme, it was feared, would not appeal to the academicians, and the text was amended. The 'community of interests and of wishes' became 'the community of suffering and of wishes' and, more important, 'the complete emancipation' of the workers become their 'moral and intellectual betterment'. The campaign was over; he was chosen and he was inundated by congratulations; congratulations which infuriated him, for they showed that to the world he was a worker who was now given the chance of escaping from his class; that few or none saw him as he saw himself, a worker taking a chance to be trained to serve his class. He dared not declare his intentions; his scorn of worldly success; 'people would think me cracked'. Nevertheless, he was resolved to devote himself to the cause of the poor and helpless, though thereby he might be 'an abomination to the rich and powerful; those who hold the keys of science and of wealth might curse him, yet he would pursue the path of the reformer through persecution, calumny, sorrow and death itself'. It was not to have a knapsack with a marshal's baton in it, not to have a career open to his talents, that Proudhon sought the scholarship. He was resolved to be a *La Tour d'Auvergne* of his class; to remain in the ranks and fight with his brethren. It was a resolution that he never broke; all his life, despite all his faults of temper and of understanding, he fought for the good cause as he conceived it.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PAMPHLETEER

PROUDHON returned to Paris in 1838, supporting himself by writing articles for a Catholic encyclopædia and correcting proofs for a royalist journal. These jobs did not last long; and he was ready to plunge into his studies, supported by the scholarship. He had dreamed of founding a review; he now wanted to express the ideas fermenting in him, and he took the first opportunity offered by sending in an essay for a prize offered by the Academy of Besançon, on the question of *The Usefulness of the Celebration of Sunday*. His essay got an honourable mention, but, more important, it revealed the essential Proudhon. The social usefulness of the Mosaic law is stressed; but for us, the most interesting themes are those that Proudhon was to spend his life in elaborating. 'Is equality of conditions an institution of nature, is it equitable, is it possible? On each of these points I dare decide for the affirmative.' There is a declaration of the absolute character of the moral law, for Rousseau had erred 'in submitting justice and morality to the decision of numbers and to the opinion of the majority.' *Lo thignob* is stressed; for it means not, 'Thou shalt not steal', but 'Thou shalt not lay anything aside for thyself'. There *must* exist a science of society which it is the work of the economist not to *invent*, but to *find*. If the form and, in the

main, the language of the essay are innocuous enough, to any reader who knows the later Proudhon, it is obvious that the *Celebration of Sunday*, for all its formal piety, shows that the Academy had caught a tartar, and in 1840 appeared the work which put this beyond doubt.

It was a very human touch in Proudhon to regard almost every book of his, while he was writing it, as epoch-making, new, final. Of none of them were these hopes better founded than the essay on property, which he was convinced might prove 'the most remarkable event of 1840'. Into it he put all his bitterness, all his delight in verbal analysis, and, he thought, the result, free from all rhetoric, had nothing like itself in all philosophy. *What is Property?* was the title, and the answer was given in the first few lines. 'If I had to answer the following question: *What is Slavery?* and answering in a single word, I replied: *It is Murder*, my meaning would be understood at once. I should have no need of a long discourse to show that the power to take from a man thought, will, personality, is a power of life and death, and that to enslave a man is to murder him. Why then, in answer to this other question: *What is Property?* can I not reply, *It is Theft* without having the assurance of not being understood, although this second proposition is only the first transformed?'

*Property is Theft.* To most of his own countrymen Proudhon, for the rest of his life, was capable of anything because of his epigram. In vain he elaborated his doctrine, explained, for twenty years, that he was a defender, not an enemy of property; he could never live down or live up to the too successful

opening lines. But he never recanted what he had written; he was indeed inordinately proud of his phrase – and there was no quicker way to earn his hate than to assert that he had not invented it or, at least, that he had not given it its first real interpretation. It was one of the crimes of Louis Blanc that he said Brissot had preceded Proudhon in this assertion, and the property in the phrase, ‘Property is Theft’ was fought over with an acerbity that has its comic side.<sup>1</sup>

The attack on property was made in three tracts. The first caused a terrific scandal and embroiled him with the Academy. The second, however (*The Letter to M. Blanqui*) was written in milder style to explain the first, which might have led to Proudhon’s arrest had not M. Blanqui, a distinguished economist, assured the Minister of Justice, M. Vivien, that Proudhon was a serious student, not a mere agitator – a good office for which Proudhon remained grateful both to the academician and the minister. The third tract was the *Letter to Considerant* or the *Warning to Proprietors*, and this was as inflammatory as the first. What are the arguments brought forward to justify the declaration that *Property is Theft*? No time need be lost in confuting the critics who point out that the idea of theft necessarily implies property. For Proudhon, property was private property. Much of his argument reads oddly to-day, if it is not remembered when he was writing and against what antagonists. In the lifetime of Proudhon’s father and mother,

<sup>1</sup> The materials for forming a judgment are presented in Volume I of the new edition of Proudhon, p.131-2. A friend has pointed out another possible source, not noted by the editor of the tract, the Marquis de Sade.

there had been an immense transference of property rights from the Church and the nobility, chiefly to the middle classes; at any rate, not to the Proudhon family. As fast as possible, the new owners began to demand a religious reverence for all property rights, including those so recently acquired! Property, indeed, had been declared to be one of the 'Rights of Man'. It is against these defences that Proudhon launches his most formidable attacks. If 'the right to property' is to have any meaning relating it to the other natural rights, it must mean the right of *every man* to have property, not the right of *some men* to exclude their less fortunate fellows from enjoyment of this 'natural right'. But property is not a natural right at all; if it were, why all the argument? 'Who,' he asks audaciously, 'ever inquires into the origin of the rights of liberty, security, equality?' All attempts to demonstrate that property has any rights, other than those based on formal law, break down. Jurists, like Grotius and Pothier, philosophers like Reid, 'chief of the Edinburgh school', produce arguments that either keep to the surface or involve deep contradictions. In short, property is *impossible!*

The first retort of the unmetaphysically-minded reader is to ask that if property is impossible, why make such a fuss about it? But by impossible Proudhon means that the idea of absolute property, as understood by the lawyers, is contradictory, is a Utopia. By property, Proudhon almost always at this stage means property in land and property in land not worked by the owner. It is rent in the common meaning of the word, not the Ricardian economic rent, that is the first great grievance of the propertyless

classes, for the mere landlord is paid for something he has not created; his relation to the economic exploitation of the land is purely parasitic. It is useless for Charles Comte to ask what about the owner who improves the land? The making of two blades of grass grow where one grew before creates rights, (very limited rights indeed), but they are apart from ownership. If a tenant improves the land he farms, the law does not give him the increased value; it goes to the landlord whose essential character is to draw an income without adding in the least to the wealth of society. This parasitic drain on labour means that production costs more than it is worth, for the landlord's part represents no economic reality. Proudhon's views of production were pessimistic and, if a large part of the total product of society went to non-producers, production must fall. At its best it is barely sufficient for the maintenance of the race; property cuts down this meagre return from labour and so property tends to kill itself, to produce impoverishment in the very exercise of its rights. As for the worker, the farmer, his lot is far worse; he has to work harder and harder, while the worker in industry is forced to undercut his fellows. As the workers without property cannot buy what they produce, and since production does not produce a surplus which can be seized with impunity by non-producers, 'property is murderous'. Moreover, property is incompatible with political liberty. If you have political equality and economic inequality, property will be attacked under cover of law, by taxation, for instance, and such attacks are inconsistent with the absolute property rights of the lawyers. Property and

equality cannot co-exist; but equality is just and what is just is what should determine the organisation of society; justice is the criterion.

It was natural for Proudhon's enemies and for hasty readers to conclude that the author of this indictment was not only a socialist but a communist.<sup>1</sup> But he never gave any grounds for this view, and both Marx and Considérant absolved Proudhon from the charge of being a renegade to his earlier convictions. If the public had been taken-in and believed this fanatical individualist to have been a communist, the fault was the public's for looking to the form rather than to the substance. In fact, Proudhon was a defender of property; but property could not survive in the post-revolutionary world if it could not be harmonised with Justice, that is to say, with equality. Already governments, for all their lip-service to property rights, are invading them. The conversion of the national debt is an attack on property, even though the conversion is formally voluntary. The holders of the debt have a right to their 5 per cent – or property rights are empty, an argument that one might have thought silly if it had not been used in our own time by Sir Ernest Benn. What is good, in property, the possibility it offers of escape from the slavery and degradation of communism, is only to be secured by equality.

Proudhon pushes the argument for equality very hard. Even the farmer who has increased wealth by his improvements on the land he tills is not entitled

<sup>1</sup> The term communist had then no party meaning ; it described the adherents to the various communistic schemes which were popular, schemes for life in communities, lay-monasteries.

to appropriate the increased wealth. After all, the fisherman whose extra skill results in a catch twice as great as that of his fellows is content with the reward of one double catch; he does not claim a double catch for ever! Proudhon had always a weakness for analogy, not as illustration, but as argument; and his attempt to limit the rights of the improving farmer to a pre-emption and yet to preserve equality are not very happy. He is hard, indeed, on all claims to superior reward, for every member of society is its debtor; no matter how hard or skilfully a man works, he dies as he is born, overdrawn at the Bank of Society. The great source of wealth is the community, and this conviction is at the basis of what M. Bouglé calls 'the sociology of Proudhon'. It is useless to say that high talents ought to be better paid, for the difference between man and man is slight and more education will reduce it further; while the scarcity of some talents merely shows that they are not much needed. Nature provides as many of each class of worker as society needs, so there is gross injustice in paying an actress like Rachel more than a seamstress; any payment of that kind must be taken from the workers. A poet who spends thirty years on a masterpiece is, at the end of it, entitled to thirty years pay as a worker, and any out-of-pocket expenses he may have incurred for books and travel. After all, there are occupations which are luxuries, one professor of philosophy is quite enough for the whole of France and one economist for every two thousand million people! Naturally, some workmen do in six hours what others take eight to do, but they must not make use of those two hours to earn more. If others can

only do four hours work in eight hours, they must not get more than half pay. The average product of the average worker, that is what should be the standard. It is easy here to see the former printer, used to the discipline of the workshop! But the real solution is to secure land for everybody who wants it, and to secure equality of resources in this way. For Proudhon, at this stage, and later, property is land and gold and silver; they must be distributed equally, or society organised so that the special privileges of their owners disappear.

The main doctrines of Proudhon are present in these three tracts – and the main fancies. Commencing a revolutionary campaign, he fires on his own side as well as on the common enemy. Not only the rich, but other rebel writers and leaders are assailed. Cabet, Saint-Simon, Fourier, Louis Blanc, the radicals of the *National*, as well as the supporters of the bourgeois monarchy, are bludgeoned. The passion for equality which animates the author does not go as far as equality between the sexes, man and woman are not in a common society, so the necessity of equality which arises between man and man is absent! In this first appearance before the great public, Proudhon was sublimely confident that he saw further into the heart of things than anyone else, and that his writings were of immense immediate importance. Property was like a criminal trying to escape cross-examination and, in the *Second Memoir*, he declares that he 'is sworn to an immense revolution, terrible to charlatans and despots'!

Pelletan was later to say that Proudhon fired a musket off in the street to attract attention, and, in

this case, he succeeded in his publicity methods. It was not for nothing that he had known the young romantics of Paris; where Gautier had worn a red waistcoat to startle the middle classes, Proudhon relied on violent language, language which often concealed far from violent thought. He now received the very thing he needed to maintain the impression he had made, a prosecution, at Besançon, for the seditious character of the *Warning to Proprietors*, a prosecution which failed and gave Proudhon an advertisement and what proved to be a dangerously high opinion of his power over an audience. The unknown printer and obscure student who had been so ill-at-ease in the houses of his teachers in Paris, was now a famous, or at least a notorious man. What were the causes of his success?

The greatest of Proudhon's assets was his admirable mastery of the French tongue. He professed to despise mere literature and mere men of letters, but, at his best, there was no contemporary writer of French prose who had a surer command of the language. This mastery he displayed, above all, in attack and, at moments, his verve and force made him not unworthy of comparison with the master whom he admired so much, Paul Louis Courier. In the first *Memoir on Property*, as in his last posthumous fragments, there are passages of invective whose technical excellence wins the admiration even of the most hostile reader. When Marx praised the literary force displayed in the first great pamphlet he, however grudgingly, recognised a polemical power in this line at least equal to his own ; and the most enthusiastic tribute to Proudhon's literary ability

comes from his rigorous critic, Arthur Desjardins. 'This plebeian carves out his phrases with profound art, the art of the great classical authors; he is a descendant of the writers whom Louis XIV protected and who perfected our tongue. He, no less than Molière, ought to have been a member of the French Academy.'

But not all of Proudhon's literary skill was spent on invective. There are in his letters, and scattered all through his writings, especially in the autobiographical fragments of *Justice in the Revolution and the Church*, pages of pure description, of reminiscence, sketches of his early days in Franche-Comté, which make one realise that he sacrificed the chance of giving Renan's *Memories of Childhood and Youth* a more formidable rival than his *Life of Jesus* was to Renan's best-seller. He gave up to his cause, to his loves and hates, the possibility of a literary career of the first order. Even when his publishers would not publish his political books, when the Press was barred to him and when literature invited him with open arms to escape from dire poverty by entering her service, he was not tempted. He dallied with the idea of literary criticism; his friends, like Sainte-Beuve, his well-meaning if timid publishers, the Garniers, tried to persuade him; but his vocation had been chosen twenty years before, when the delights and duties of controversy, of expounding the truth and of confuting error had taken possession of him. His 'one talent which was death to hide' was for public affairs, his duty was to aid in the deliverance of the poor from the chains in which their ignorance of the true cause of their ills bound them. Proudhon was content to be a pamphleteer.

He was a great pamphleteer, but the uncritical praises of his admirers have made it harder for the world to appreciate his greatness. He was only occasionally, and for brief periods, a keen reasoner. He was not, despite repeated assertions of disciples, in his own lifetime and since, a master of rigid logical demonstration. He himself was, indeed, under the illusion that logic was his strong point. He was excessively fond of casting argument into logical forms and having brought his demonstration to a triumphant conclusion, he was prone to regard any critic who demurred to his results, as wilfully blind – or merely incapable of rational thought. In his long and barren controversy with Bastiat, over the nature of interest, he was at last provoked into declaring that 'I have to do with a man whose intelligence is hermetically sealed and for whom logic does not exist.' Bastiat was not a profound thinker, and his share of the controversy earned him the contempt of Walras, but he was not as stupid as Proudhon made out. In fact, Proudhon's devotion to logic was very superficial. A logical method, the series of Fourier, the antimonies of Kant, the dialectic of Hegel, the syllogism of the scholastics, was, for Proudhon, not a means of testing truth, or of finding it, but a device for persuading his readers of truths which he held on intuitional grounds. This is no doubt true of many more writers than Proudhon, but few writers of his ability have relied on more childish fallacies with more naïve confidence than he. The pain with which Walras disentangles some of the less flagrant sophistries, the repeated bold transitions from a moral to an economic category which is the great Proudhonian trick, is

unconsciously funny. In the Proudhonian world, 'equality of respect' and 'equality of incomes' were terms in the same syllogism, for Proudhon had no understanding of an intellectual world in which non-moral categories existed. For all his parade of rigid demonstration of truths which would save the world, Proudhon was never asking 'Is this True?' but always 'Is this Right?' If his opponents had been notably more clear-headed than Proudhon, he would have been a less formidable controversialist than, in fact, he was; but in the middle of the nineteenth century, orthodox economists had not acquired their present self-denying attitude and, consciously or unconsciously, mixed their own categories. Even Walras, who was fighting at a higher level than Bastiat or Thiers, committed himself to the view that it was impudent for Say (and Proudhon) to attack the psychological results of the division of labour, since division of labour had, or would, reduce working hours, so that the worker who had spent ten hours making the twelfth part of a pin could restore his mutilated personality by any form of recreation he liked! The assumption, that the monotony or variety of work was in itself unimportant, came more easily to the mathematician than to the former printer who remained to his death so proud that he had mastered a whole trade, not a mere part of a process. But what was an occasional slip with Walras, was frequent with lesser men, and the legal apologists for property, who mixed up implicit utilitarianism, legal dogma, hazardous anthropology, in one stout affirmation of the property system as defined by the *Code Napoléon*, were easy marks for Proudhon's logical devices.

Naturally, such readers as were not taken-in by the parade of logical rigour, were sometimes inclined to doubt Proudhon's good faith. They pointed out (it was not very hard) contradictions and inconsistencies. Critics on the left thought his adoption of the rôle of the candid friend an expression of spleen as well as of intellectual disagreement; critics on the right thought he was, in another sense, a traitor to the workers by filling them with half-baked and chimerical ideas which distracted their attention from practicable reforms. Both can find apparently conclusive texts, but Proudhon was both honest and disinterested, only he had mistaken his abilities; he was not a philosopher; he was not an economist; he was a moralist, for whom the object of all social and economic arrangements was not the increasing of the level of material well-being, but the creation of a society in which the great law of the universe, the subordination of all ends to the rule of Justice, embodied in independent and equal men (or, more strictly, heads of families) was, at last, after thousands of years of error, to be given free play. This preoccupation with right saved Proudhon from difficulties which assailed other socialist leaders, for he did not promise to increase production. His arguments against capitalism were not arguments based on its inefficiency, but on its injustice. Occasionally, he does make optimistic prophecies; when he is trying to refute Malthus, he makes bold assertions of the greater rapidity of the growth of production compared with human fertility, but his heart is not in such demonstrations. He believed, that the human race was destined to work harder and harder and, indeed, it was this increasing

burden of labour that would solve the population problems by making continence easy to the weary labourers. The most that Proudhon promises is the diversion to useful work of the soldiers, officials and other unproductive members of society made necessary by the present state system and, in addition, the equalisation of property rights will force the idle rich into productive activities. This is something but not much, for even when the rich and their political parasites have got off the backs of the poor, those backs will still be bent by the natural necessity of unceasing toil. Although Proudhon talked a great deal about the division of labour, he was really doubtful of its economic efficacy. He thinks that the labour saved is merely diverted into other equally unproductive channels, and this is the basis of his persistent objection to free trade. On his own principles, he was bound to oppose free trade. One of the few legitimate activities of the state was to even out the different factors of production. The owner of a hundred acres in the Beauce should not thereby be allowed to ruin the owner of a hundred acres in the Cantal; and, still less, should the producers of France be ruined by American wheat and Lancashire cotton. But Proudhon is not content with this application of his equalitarian theories. At the end of his life he tried to show that the Cobden Treaty was wholly deceptive, because even if the price of cotton goods went down, the price of wine would go up equally! Bordeaux and Manchester would benefit at the expense of the cotton spinners of Rouen and of the French worker who would no longer be able to afford his native wine. Without going very far into the argument, it is easy to see that

Proudhon did not understand or refused to consider what the free trade case was and he would have been well advised not to plunge into a controversy for which he was ill-fitted.

If his pamphlets and his trial brought Proudhon fame, they did not bring him fortune. With a simplicity which never left him, he thought that the government and social order which he had been assailing would give him a job. Needless to say, the two official posts he had hoped for, were not wasted on so incorrigible an agitator; and he had to shoulder the debts of his unfortunate printing business, the burden of his parents without an income with the ending of his £60 a year from his three years scholarship. He had never been so poor as he was just after he had become famous. He found an employer in a judge who had a desire to win a reputation as a criminologist and for whom Proudhon was to furnish information and ideas. It was not a dignified post, but he thought he could smuggle his ideas into the work of the eminently respectable judge. Even a judge could see through this trick, for Proudhon, in his machiavellian moments, had a marked resemblance to the villain of melodrama who hisses behind his hand, 'I don't mean a word of what I am telling this simpleton.' The collaboration and the income came to an end, but Proudhon was now deep in the writing of a great philosophical work of which he had, in advance, the highest possible opinion, seeing himself as another Newton. He had got rid of his printing business at a loss of £400, a terrible burden of debt for one in his position and his livelihood was a most urgent problem. An old school friend took him into his firm,

Gauthier Brothers; the business was that of transporting coal on the Rhône-Saône system and Proudhon became an expert on river transportation, and, in his own eyes, a master of business method. As was usual with him, all his experience was worked into his philosophy. It reinforced his belief that other revolutionaries who knew nothing of book-keeping were unworthy of attention, for book-keeping by double-entry applied to society was the solution of all social problems; so arithmetical arguments now begin to come in at suitable and unsuitable moments. Gauthier's business was beginning to suffer from the competition of railways; and Proudhon began to write on railway economics. Theorists might talk about savings in time and money, but he *knew*, that if it were not for the double-dealing of the government under the influence of the speculators, the canals and rivers of France would hold their own and departments which had river communications in their territory would not have their vested interests ruined by the selfish greed of the other departments which cared nothing for the bargemen or stevedores of Lyons, if only they could get their goods carried cheaply and quickly from Paris to Marseilles! It is difficult to decide if he detested railways more for being so often under the control of Saint-Simonists (who were also Jews), than he detested Saint-Simonists for being builders and exploiters of railways! When Proudhon tries to discuss railways and canals the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness' is seldom far away!

But business was only a means of livelihood; the passion for preaching was as strong as ever. He dreamed of editing a newspaper; he engaged in an

attack on the famous Dominican preacher, Lacordaire; and he published his treatise *On the Creation of Order in Humanity, or Principles of Political Organisation*. This is a confused work which its author afterwards regretted. It shows the high-water mark of Fourier's influence and some of Proudhon's disillusionment with it may be due to this inconvenient fact; but there is a good deal of essential Proudhon scattered through these ill-planned pages, most characteristic, perhaps, in the announcement of the true object of political economy. 'Either political economy is a hoax and those who teach it are liars: or it really has as its object, the centralisation of industrial forces, and *the disciplining of the market.*'

If *The Creation of Order* was ambitious, the book which grew out of it was more ambitious still, for Proudhon was convinced that he had discovered fundamental contradictions in the writings of the classical economists. He proposed to show the existence of these contradictions and, later, to harmonise them. So the motto of his new book was *Destruam et Aedificabo* (I shall destroy and build up). He secured as publishers, Guillaumin, the leading economic publishers, and they insisted in tempering the vigour of his assaults on the orthodox economists. The book appeared on October 15, 1846, under the title of *The System of Economic Contradictions or the Philosophy of Poverty*.

Although there are still writers who regard this book highly, its main importance, to-day, is that it marked the occasion of Proudhon's break with Marx. The latter, as a refugee in Paris, had made Proudhon's acquaintance and, for a time, there was a brisk

exchange of ideas between them. Marx later professed to have indoctrinated Proudhon with Hegel – and to regret it, since Proudhon was incapable of using the dialectical method successfully and was only led further astray by his attempts to do so. This Proudhon would not admit and, indeed, the question was of little moment, for Hegel, like Kant, was mere top-dressing for Proudhon's ideas and he was quite capable of getting a smattering of Hegelian language from other sources than Marx. A rupture was bound to come; each was a born teacher, but a poor disciple; each was jealous of fame and of authority. Sorel suggests that Marx came to resent the influence which Proudhon had acquired in Germany at a time when he, the learned doctor, was still unknown and there are some evidences of this in the confutation of Proudhon which Marx hastened to publish. But apart from personal differences, the doctrinal positions of the two men were widely apart. For Proudhon, socialism was primarily a solution for a moral problem, the deliverance of the individual from the fetters imposed on him by the industrial system; he was not, and never pretended to be, a communist. For Marx, there were no absolute moral truths which had existed from the beginning of time and which the French Revolution had revealed; the fundamental force was the organisation of the methods of production. A clash between the materialist and the spiritualist views of history was inevitable. In any case, Proudhon, for all his pretensions, was not a system builder, he repeated, in various forms, what he considered a few fundamental truths, but he recoiled from a new orthodoxy, especially

one coming from another source and animated by another spirit. Before he broke with Marx, he appealed to him 'to give an example of a learned and foresighted tolerance . . . don't let us pose as apostles of a new religion, even of the religion of logic, the religion of reason.' On these terms, he thought it possible to co-operate with Marx, and he willingly awaited Marx's criticisms of his book. 'I am willing to accept the rod from your hands, if there is reason for it, and with good grace, waiting for my revenge.' The rod did descend, but not on a grateful victim!

Marx's criticism took the form of a long, able, hostile and angry tract called *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Proudhon would not have been Proudhon – or a human being – if he had remained passive under this assault. Marx was still obscure, (twenty years later, for Proudhon's first biographer, Saint-Beuve, he had remained obscure), and he hurt Proudhon's pride as well as his doctrines. He declared that Proudhon owed his reputation in France to the belief that he was a master of German philosophy and, in Germany to the belief that he was a master of French economics; both of these beliefs, as Marx proposed to show, were erroneous. Proudhon was a clever pamphleteer who had overestimated his strength and, far from being a leader of the social revolution, was a champion of the most backward class of all, that of the 'lesser bourgeoisie' to which he belonged, a class doomed to disappear, and one whose wriggles under the harrow of modern capitalism had no permanent historical interest and could in no way affect the movement of society. In attempting to erect the prejudices of this class into eternal laws of nature, in

his preoccupation with 'right' and 'wrong', instead of with the dialectical movement of history, Proudhon showed his incapacity for understanding either philosophy or economics; he neither understood Hegel nor could apply Ricardo. 'The work of M. Proudhon is not simply a treatise on political economy, an ordinary book, it is a Bible. "Mysteries", "Secrets dragged from the bosom of God", "Revelations", nothing is lacking.' These rhetorical passages are irrelevant, but they are symptomatic of Proudhon's mind, for *he* thinks of economic activity as subordinated to ethical activity, but if the work of one man is now worth that of another, 'it is not the doing of M. Proudhon's "eternal justice", it is solely the accomplishment of modern industry'.

This assault, when it came, infuriated Proudhon. He had expected attacks from the right. His patient friend, Bergmann, had reproached him with the pamphleteering character he had given to what passed for a work of science, but Proudhon defended his personalities. 'To my mind, in politics, in practical morals, in social science, in all that concerns active life and the actuality of societies, theories are not merely ideas, abstractions of the mind; they are interests, influences, alliances, intrigues, persons as well.' But what was sauce for the goose was not sauce for the gander; and the 'libel of a Doctor Marx' was 'a tissue of insults, abuse, calumnies, falsifications and plagiarisms'. As the notes he made on his copy show, Proudhon thought that *The Poverty of Philosophy* was merely an expression of jealousy on Marx's part. 'The real meaning of Marx's work is that he regrets that, all through, I have thought like him and that

I have said it before him.' Whatever Marx's motives may have been (and he was not altogether an amiable man!) this was not one of them, for the two men differed profoundly as to method and as to object.

But even to-day it is still not enough to say of a book, to dispose of it, that Marx did not approve. The merits of the two men were very different and Proudhon might have incurred just criticism and yet the book be, in the main, a good one. To one reader, at least, it seems a bad one. It loses, by its length and diffuseness, the fighting point of the *Memoirs on Property*; if it has dropped much of the terminology, it preserves much of the confusion of *The Creation of Order*; it has more than the usual share of rhetoric and less than the usual share of eloquence. God is brought in and then assailed as the origin of evil. The refusal, or inability, to understand what the classical economists were driving at, makes long passages mere verbiage. There is the customary assault on railways and the usual philology, ingeniously defended to Bergmann, who thought it irrelevant – and, as philology, bad. But if Proudhon's genius is often hidden, it sometimes flashes out. He wins a few verbal, if not substantial, victories over his antagonists; and there are momentary triumphs of his irony. 'What need have we now of the dietary rules of the Church? Thanks to taxes, all the year is Lent for the worker; and his Easter dinner is not equal to the Bishop's Good Friday collation.' But there were people whom the book impressed and events were soon to make of its author, an actor, instead of merely an observer.

## CHAPTER III

### THE REVOLUTIONARY LEADER

PROUDHON had grown more and more discontented with his job; it kept him away from Paris, in Lyons and travelling round the provinces. Even at the best of times he was not easy to get on with. 'I felt,' he wrote to Bergmann, 'something that was unsuitable to my ideas and tastes in their kind of business and, above all, in the way they carried it on'; so, in October, 1847, he settled in Paris, hoping to make a place for himself, to start a newspaper, *The People*, which 'will be the first act of the economic revolution, the plan of campaign of work against capital. . . . I hope the editing will be as original as the position is exceptional.' He made his preparations, badly shaken by the death of his mother, 'worn out, like my father, by age, difficulties, toil, weariness. . . . I cannot accustom myself to the idea that nobody cares about me, that my old mother is gone.' The temperature of the political battle was rising; but Proudhon looked on the parliamentary battle with scorn. 'The best thing that could happen for the French people, would be the throwing of a hundred members of the opposition into the Seine with millstones round their necks. . . . They are worth a hundred times less than the conservatives, for they are hypocrites into the bargain.' But this was not the solution that was found; for, on February 24, the

bourgeois monarchy fell, with less resistance and far less dignity than had the elder line of the Bourbons. The sceptical observer of politics had taken part in the overthrow. Proudhon had gone out when the fighting was taking place and had been called on by Flocon, one of the leaders of the revolt, to serve the revolution with his trade. He had set up the manifesto: 'Citizens, Louis-Philippe is having you murdered as did Charles X; send him to rejoin Charles X.' He helped to build a barricade; he saw the revolution triumph; and he was filled with contempt both for the government which had collapsed so feebly and for the leaders of the revolt who were being carried to power on a wave of popular feeling. The workers were all right, gay, brave, joking, honest. But, on the morning after the victory, when all Paris had lost its head with enthusiasm, Proudhon kept his. The revolution had no plan. 'It must be given a direction and already I see it perishing in a flood of speeches.' However, 'I should prefer to believe that my point of view is false, rather than accuse everybody else of folly.' Proudhon was not a model of prudence and, when he was engaged in conflict, he often lost all sense of proportion, but to have written this diagnosis of the Revolution of February 24, on February 25, was an astonishing feat of penetration for it was Proudhon who was right – and the naïve enthusiasts who were wrong.

The early illusions were natural enough; the bourgeois monarch had gone, with hardly a show of resistance, why should the bourgeoisie itself not be as easily displaced? As for the society which should be built on the ruins of the old order, were there not

plenty of acute critics and bold constructors to be pressed into service? Was there not Louis Blanc? Were there not the Fourierists and the Saint-Simonists, and Cabetians? Was there not Proudhon who had promised to provide a solution of the contradictions of the old system? Some of the workers remembered Proudhon; they called on him and pressed him into service on February 26; two days after the fall of the monarchy. They offered to provide paper and a printer. Proudhon consented; he was to have his journal at last and he was launched on the dangerous career of a party leader; he had now both to preach his doctrine and get it accepted. He stood as a candidate for the Doubs (*Franche-Comté*) and for Paris. He appealed to Louis Blanc, who represented socialism in the Provisional Government, in an effort to find common ground. Despite his avowed intentions of conciliating masters and workers, he was not elected – and Louis Blanc snubbed him. He had, for the moment, to preach his doctrine through pamphlets and through his newspaper, *The Representative of the People*. What did he preach?

The essential doctrine in Proudhon is the identification of Justice with equality and the coercion of economic life into accord with Justice. The necessity and possibility of equality was taken as obviously true; all economic reasoning *had* to end with equality. So, for the theory of value, Proudhon substitutes a theory of the just price. If the orthodox economists say that value is not fixed, but is a relation between supply and demand, they are condemned out of their own mouths, for what meaning can 'value' have if it is not certain? Room is left for the 'higgling of the

market', but, for Proudhon, this is no metaphor; he really *means* the higgling of the market, the chaffering in the village square between the man selling a cow and the man selling fodder. The just price is *revealed* by this higgling; the two parties discover, by higgling, what is the real price of a cow and of fodder in terms of each other; it will lie between the highest demand and the lowest offer in each case, but the range of variation is small, for value is based on the cost of production. It is doubtful if Proudhon appreciated all the ambiguities hidden under his 'cost of production', but he saw some of them. The cost of production is that of the average producer, a price fixed by the practice of the trade. How that customary price is to be fixed without 'market-anarchy' we are not clearly told. A healthy society is that in which all production is organised on a basis of *mutuality*, when producers agree to be consumers of the goods produced by each other. When that occurs, all prices will be 'constituted'; the present anarchy, in which all goods are priced in money will be ended; and the monopoly of money, and of credit, which is the stronghold of counter-revolutionary capitalism, will fall.

Proudhon's immediate object was to persuade the workers – and the government – that it was easy to bring about this state of affairs, to give the revolution a real social content. What is needed is cheap, or rather, free credit. It is impossible to understand Proudhon's views on this question without knowing what he believed about money. Money (gold and silver) were the only commodities whose value *was* constituted; this gave their possessors an unfair

advantage over the producers of unconstituted values. It is doubtful how far Proudhon realised that gold and silver had a variable price like all other goods. He talks of a happy time if gold and silver were as plentiful as iron and copper and so no more valuable, but it is doubtful if he saw the implications of this remark. A price level was not interpreted by him as an aspect of the price of money. Marx had asked him if he really believed that *everything* could be dear at the same time and it seems probable that he did! Gold and goods could *both* be dear. In form, at any rate, Proudhon was a fanatical deflationist. He believed that there was some social gain in an absolutely uniform and symmetrical reduction of prices. All his life he thought of low prices, not as a sign of abundance, but as a good in themselves; the Restoration became a golden age in retrospect, because prices had been so low. 'Real wages' is a conception which is seldom traceable in Proudhon's work. The first measure he advocated, was a rigorous deflation of all costs, not to meet world competition, not to shift a burden from one class to another, but simply to make the meagre supply of money go further. There was to be a general reduction of interest charges, the bank-rate, salaries and wages. Proudhon thought this programme quite practicable, and in some forms of it, he argued that no one would lose, that the total result would be to have everybody where they started — except that all goods would be cheaper. When he advocated this, in his debate with Thiers, the latter asked, naturally enough, what was the good of going to all that trouble? In fact, of course, as Thiers pointed out, Proudhon's schemes

would *not* result in a uniform reduction, but in a reduction of the returns from one kind of property, that based on fixed-interest charges: it was fixed interest, not property as such, that Proudhon, at this moment of his career, regarded as theft. Marx Bastiat, Thiers, Walras, all in vain pointed out that interest was only an aspect of property; that it was inseparable from property. Proudhon was adamant, interest was wrong because only labour could create wealth; the owner of capital did no work when he lent it, so that any interest on it was stolen from the borrower of the capital.

There are two classes of writers on credit, those who believe that a bird in the hand is always worth a bird plus *something* in the bush; and those who regard this supposed axiom as a superstition. Proudhon belonged to the second class. For him, lending was no hardship, you only lent something for which you had no immediate use and you got it back intact after the period agreed upon. Where, then, was the privation for which Bastiat and the other preachers of orthodoxy said you had to be compensated? At times, pressed in formal controversy, Proudhon hesitated and allowed various charges to be made for loans, but interest as such was wrong. It was one of the errors of the Church that having once grasped the moral and economic truth that interest was wrong, she had wavered and tried to make distinctions between banking and usury; there was no distinction, all interest for the use of money or goods *was* usury. In Proudhon's money market, only demand counted; and, if all borrowers resolved to stop being bled, usury would stop. That lending might stop too; and

that a credit structure, based on loans which were no privation to the lender, might be rather inadequate for the needs of society did not occur to him, for the time element was disregarded. He seems, at moments, to regard the importance attached to immediate possession as a counter-revolutionary superstition and when he reflects that what prevents a farmer who, over thirty years, pays the total value of his farm in rent, from thereby becoming its owner, is the insistence of the proprietor of the land on money down, his indignation is at least as much directed at the stupidity, as at the cupidity of the landlord! To declare that all rent should be deemed part purchase and that the rent of money could thus be avoided seemed simple enough. It was this illusion that property could be left intact and prevented from having its fruits that infuriated Marx, who could find nothing worse to say of Proudhon, as an economic controversialist, than that even Bastiat was too much for him.

The bank-rate declared by the Bank of France seemed to Proudhon, not an example of the general power of capital, but a result of the legal monopoly given the bank. Let the state order the reduction of the bank-rate and of all fixed charges to one per cent or half per cent and the usurers would be defeated. Who, he asked, would borrow at five per cent if they could get money at a half per cent, this being a charge made merely to cover book-keeping expenses? Who would lend at that price when by buying property, instead of titles to money, they could evade this legislation, was a question he did not answer! If he did not answer the question who would lend

money, he did answer the question, how would credit be provided? By mutuality. The monopoly of capital could be broken if all producers ignored the monetary system and exchanged goods at just prices, guaranteed by mutual confidence. As time was unimportant, the knowledge that, at some time in the future, you would get a bag of flour in return for the immediate delivery of three pairs of shoes, was all that you could want. If all classes of producers were united in these mutual agreements, money would be unnecessary and the entries on the books of the bank would take their place. Book-keeping without money, that was the panacea.

He demanded, therefore, that the government should decree that 'since direct exchange without money and without interest, is both part of natural right and of public utility', interest should be cut down and free credit established. Failure to realise both the desirability and practicability of this reform, was a sign of wickedness, or of stupidity, or of both. Most left-wing leaders fell under this ban. Some were communists and so enemies of liberty and the family; others were absorbed in mere politics, in universal suffrage and other devices for rendering harmless what was necessarily harmful, the authoritarian state. In pursuit of these chimeras, they needlessly alienated the middle classes who could be shown that they had as much interest in the abolition of the credit monopoly as any worker. In the hectic atmosphere of the spring and summer of 1848, when the old order seemed to be collapsing everywhere, Proudhon, like many others, acquired a following. At a by-election in June, he was elected to the

assembly from Paris with a very handsome majority. He now had to play the part of the statesman, and his conduct in the next few months alienated him from most of his political allies, and so drove him further towards his natural goal, anarchy.

By the time Proudhon entered the assembly, the revolution was obviously ebbing. The crushing of the revolt of the workers in the days of June showed that bourgeois society was stronger than had seemed possible in March. The countryside had sent an immense conservative majority to the assembly, and reaction grew stronger every day. Proudhon, despite some rash words, was against trying to remedy this state of affairs by armed revolt, but he was himself a scarecrow to right-thinking people. A play was put on called *Property is Theft*, and Proudhon was daily abused as a monster, inspired by the Devil. His newspaper was suppressed again and again, and Proudhon was a liability to the left-wing parties who were now trying to save something out of the wreck. When Proudhon, on July 31, declared his policy to the assembly, that body voted that 'the proposition of Citizen Proudhon is an odious attack on the principles of public morals'. There were only two dissentient votes, that of Proudhon himself and of Greppo. The rift with the left-wing leaders continued to grow. Proudhon refused to vote against the reactionary ministry of which his old protector, Vivien, was a member. He fought a duel with Félix Pyat, and would have had to fight others had he not refused to be bound by the conventions of French politics. He was a leader of the extreme left section which broke up party unity in the presidential

election by running Raspail against Ledru-Rollin. Out of seven million votes cast, Raspail got thirty thousand. The unknown Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, whom Proudhon had tried to indoctrinate, was elected, and Proudhon poured out abuse on the new head of France whom many critics felt he had done much to elect. The assembly was not slow to take its chance to reprove sedition in the person of the enemy of society, and it allowed Proudhon to be tried for his attacks on the head of the state. He was sentenced to three years' imprisonment and three thousand francs fine. He had just started his 'Bank of the People', but the chance of trying out his theories was lost. He escaped to Belgium, but was rash enough to return to Paris, was denounced, and sent to prison.

His life as an active politician was at an end; and he had the leisure to think out his system and digest the experience of the past year. He had also a new tie to take the place left vacant by his mother, for he had married a poor seamstress, Euphrasie Piégard, 'with premeditation, without passion, to be a father of a family, to have a complete life, and to have by me, in the vortex into which I have cast myself, an image of maternal simplicity and modesty'. His wife was a fit companion for an agitator; ill-educated, but an excellent manager and resolute in all difficulties. He married outside the Church, a great triumph for him, for his wife's father was a royalist of the extreme right. The inconveniences of such a connection were to be made evident when his father-in-law was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for a royalist conspiracy after a trial, of which the most

interesting document was a petition to the Pretender, the Comte de Chambord, written by Proudhon himself! It was, said Proudhon, a hoax, but by that time (1853), he had enough enemies to rub it in to him that there are follies which look like crimes. For the moment, marriage calmed him. His wife lived opposite the prison, Sainte-Pélagie, and in November, 1850, Proudhon was delighted by the birth of daughter.

For the greater part of his prison life, he was very leniently treated, by British standards, allowed daily visits from his wife, and allowed to go out of prison. He wrote for his paper, now a weekly called *The People*, and even managed to get tried and acquitted for another violent piece of journalism. As the reaction got stronger, and as the resistance of the left took the criminally foolish form of the insurrection of June, 1849, Proudhon's prison liberties were restricted. He was, for a period, sent to Doullens and to Bourges, where he met most of the other left-wing leaders and was characteristically scornful of them. 'The one thing I dislike more than persecutors,' he was reported to say, 'are martyrs.' He had himself been a victim of June, for the National Guard, now the storm-troopers of reaction, had destroyed his printing plant. The futile appeals to more rebellion which came from the exiles infuriated him and, when the dying Republic was snuffed out by the President's *coup d'état* of December 2, 1851, Proudhon's dislike of the victors was considerably tempered by his scorn of the vanquished. By sweeping away the debris of democracy, the dictator was leaving the way clear for the prophet of the true revolutionary doctrine – anarchy.

Proudhon's place in the history of anarchy is secure; there were moments of inconsistency; moments of wavering when he looked to the state and even to mere politics for deliverance, but, as he announced in the *First Memoir*, 'I am an anarchist' — and he remained one. Anarchy was in the air; many reformers besides Proudhon were anxious to carry out the Saint-Simonist programme and to substitute 'the administration of things for the administration of men'. By anarchy, Proudhon meant the absence of a master and of subjects. He was always sceptical of mere differences in political form. He was a republican by temperament; his devotion to the revolution as the dawn of equality made it hard for him to tolerate such a glaring exception to equality as hereditary monarchy; but he never attached a sufficient importance to the sacred word 'republic' to qualify as quite orthodox among the writers and politicians of the left. What he wanted of a government was that it should commit suicide gracefully, giving way to the free anarchical society without trying to make the birth of the new order difficult. If the House of Orleans would put itself at the disposal of the Revolution, Proudhon would put up with the anomaly of hereditary political power. He was willing, later, to make the same bargain with the House of Bonaparte, and he saw nothing to choose between a monarchical and a democratic tyranny. Indeed, he was a blasphemer of revolutionary orthodoxy; at times a defender of the memory of the Bourbons, even of Charles X, a praiser of the Charter of 1814, and an assailant of the Jacobins whose divine right of the majority was as outrageous

in theory and far more dangerous in fact than the divine right of 'Henry V'. When personally infuriated he was willing to believe any nonsense about Napoleon III, ready to credit his imminent deposition at the hands of palace conspirators, but never willing to put his differences with the imperial government on the ground of political illegitimacy. Universal suffrage was a delusion; but a government professing to be based on it should not be allowed to tamper with its working, yet the obsession of 'the Jacobins' with mere politics, the attempt to get the state into their own hands, was a deception of the people, for if property was theft, the state was tyranny, be it empire or republic. The ideal to be aimed at in matters of government is not 'direct legislation or direct government or simplified government, but no more government'. As early as 1840, Proudhon had declared that most of the functions of government will disappear, and those which remain will take on a scientific character, a science of which the data are statistics (for the belief in book-keeping was present before the experience of it); but, if the basis of anarchy is present in *What is Property?*, it is in the books written after the death of the illusions of 1848 that the doctrine is set forth in most detail and with most enthusiasm. A state, Proudhon had finally learned, could only be an evil whether it was ruled by Ledru-Rollin or by Louis Napoleon. Government was *always* for the governors, never for the governed. No democratic machinery could alter the fact that those who detained power were masters and those who had to obey, servants. All sophisms of the general will, all social contracts in the manner of Rousseau

which attempted to explain away the necessary surrender of liberty involved in any powerful state, were enemies of the rights of every man to rule himself, not in fiction, but in fact. Not only was the state an evil, it was not a necessary evil. 'The social constitution,' he wrote in *The Confessions of a Revolutionary*, 'is bound up with human nature, liberal, necessary . . . its development consists above all in weakening and getting rid of the political constitution which is essentially artificial, restrictive and transitory.' How was the state to be replaced and society given its constitution? By the magic power of contract. No lawyer, not even Sir Henry Maine, had a more lyrical conception of the glories of contract than had Proudhon. Mutual contracts were to solve the problem of exchange and of credit; they were also to solve the problem of political organisation. *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century* is a hymn to contract. 'The idea of contract excludes that of government. . . . What characterises the contract, the mutual convention, is that in virtue of this convention man's liberty and wellbeing increase, whilst by the institution of an authority, both necessarily diminish.' The object of social science is 'to find a form of bargain which, bringing to unity the divergence of interests, identifying the private and the general good, effacing the inequality of nature by that of education, resolves all political and economic contradictions; where each individual is equally and synonymously producer and consumer; citizen and prince; administrator and administered; where his liberty always increases, without any need ever to alienate any part of it; where his wellbeing grows

indefinitely, without his experiencing, from society or from his fellow-citizens, any injury either in his property or his work or in his income or in his connections of interest or affection with his kind'.

How was this paradise to be reached? Not by the aid of government, that was Louis Blanc's error. A government cannot be paternal if it is limited, for, asks Proudhon, 'what father ever thought of making a bargain with his family. . . . The authority whose seat is in the family is a mystical principle, anterior and superior to the will of the people concerned', but society has no such basis for its authority. On the other hand, an unlimited authority in the state is inequality, tyranny. . . . 'The rule of contracts substituted for the rule of laws would constitute . . . the real sovereignty of the people, the REPUBLIC.' Proudhon was conscious that his faith in contract was not universally shared. 'You imagine that it is impossible to fulfil these conditions. The social contract, when you consider the frightful number of relations it ought to regulate . . . seems something like squaring the circle or perpetual motion. That is why, worn out with the fight, you relapse into despotism and force. . . . Realise, however, that if the social contract can be concluded between two producers – and who doubts that, in this simple form, there is a solution? – it can equally be concluded between millions since the undertaking is the same, and the number of signatures – while they make it more and more effective – do not add an article [to the agreement]. Your alleged inability is non-existent then; it is ridiculous and makes you inexcusable.'

Given the practicability of a society so organised, it

must be understood that the contractual basis of society does not create rights and obligations not set out in the bond. All this talk about 'association' is dangerous, for it implies that there is a common will in the associates, that the body they create has a life of its own outside the narrow objects for which it has been created. But such theories are conducive to tyranny. A society for production creates no bond between its members outside those indispensable for the economic activity of the society. The absolute independence of each member must be observed. No social good is worth the price of liberty. Naturally, such a doctrine made its author suspicious of trade unions, and strikes he abhorred from the beginning to the end of his life.

As was usual with Proudhon, he destroyed before he built up. Even in the comparatively early expositions (*The General Idea of the Revolution: The Confessions of a Revolutionary*), written under the shadow of the disasters of 1848-49, Proudhon recognises that the state will not disappear at once, although, for obvious reasons, he is convinced that if other state institutions may have a little life in them, the judicial system must be immediately abolished for the state has no right to punish, although a man may ask to be punished.

The apparent necessity of the state is due to economic inequality, because of the absence of justice. When all men have bound themselves to mutual justice, the need for the coercive apparatus of the state will vanish. Even in the present system, the claims of the state are exaggerated. France has to endure an immense army, hordes of officials, a splendid court,

all necessitating an overwhelming burden of taxation, because Frenchmen are vain; because they want their country to make a great impression in the world. They are the victims of any skilful jingo. What good does it do them? They are worse off than the Swiss, who have no such illusions. Their vast and expensive army ought to be replaced by a militia which would be competent for defence, but not for tyranny.

In any case, there is not one French nation; there are thirty submerged nationalities in France, and, in a rationally organised society, these 'nations' would be the natural units of government. The deadly centralisation beloved of tyrants, Bonapartes and Jacobins, with their fetish of 'indivisible France' would be destroyed, to the benefit of all concerned, even of Paris. As long as Paris has concentrated within her walls, the government, the financial and educational institutions of the country; as long as the whole of France is taxed to adorn the capital with splendid buildings; so long it will be impossible to permit Paris to have any active political life of her own.

The solution to this, as to other governmental problems, was federalism. This was the answer to the contradictions Proudhon thought he had shown to exist in the political sphere, the clash between government, even 'democratic' government and liberty. The smaller the unit, the greater degree of freedom in government. The great industrial units should rule themselves and a federalism, based on the free co-operation of the communes and provinces, would solve the purely governmental problems. The commune (the parish or town) should rule itself, provide

for its own justice and its own educational needs. The intrusion of the central government into these fields should cease. The commune should even provide and control its own church. The great day of the Revolution was the day of the Federations, before Jacobin absolutism had diverted the Revolution from the true path.

This enthusiasm for federalism affected Proudhon's judgment of current events in odd ways. He bitterly regretted the annexation of Savoy to France. What fools the Savoyards were to let themselves be tricked by their clergy into voting for annexation to France when they might have become a free Swiss Canton! In any case, how disgusting was the spectacle of Victor Emmanuel abandoning the land of his ancestors! Italian unity is only a hoax for is not the destruction of Tuscan nationality a great disaster? The real greatness of Italy is only possible in a federal state. So we find Proudhon defending the projected Italian confederation against the blind admirers of Mazzini and lamenting the defeat of the armies of King Francis of Naples! The spectacle of the great revolutionary fostering the same sacred flame as Cardinal Antonelli and 'King Bomba's Lazzaroni' was startling enough, but Proudhon even asserted that the Lombard peasants were quite indifferent whether their oppressors were Italians or Austrians. Indeed, Austria, by moving in the path of federalism, was making her place in the forefront of civilisation secure, while Italy was going back!

Real unity, he was to write at the end of his life, 'was in inverse proportion to size; so, in every collectivity, organic power loses in intensity what it gains

in extension and reciprocally. . . . Apply this law to politics; a state is essentially one, indivisible, inviolable: the bigger her population and area grow, the further force of cohesion and the unity of the government will decrease. . . . Let branches be formed, let colonies be formed . . . these will form a federal bond with the mother state – or even will have no connection at all.' Small states or communes, directly ruled by freemen, who were economically equal, each master of his trade or of his farm – and of his family, that was Proudhon's ideal community; a community like the Battant of his youth, but not under the guns of the citadel of Besançon nor at the disposal of a prefect sent from Paris! In a federal organisation for each country and for Europe as a whole, Proudhon, at the end of his life, asserted that he had found the solution of the political problem he had posed in 1840. He had destroyed – he now built up. 'I began by *anarchy*, the conclusion of my criticism of the idea of government, to finish by *federation*, as the necessary base of European public law and, later on, of the organisation of all states. On all this question, it is easy to see that *logic*, *right* and *liberty* are dominant; so that public order basing itself directly on the liberty and conscience of the citizen, *anarchy*, the absence of all restraint, of all police, authority, judges, legal rules, etc., is discovered to be the correlative of the highest social virtue and the ideal of human government. No doubt we are far away from it, and it will take centuries before we reach this ideal; but our LAW is to advance in that direction.'

## CHAPTER IV

### PROUDHON AND JUSTICE

WHILE Proudhon was formulating his doctrine of anarchy, he was watching the political situation with impatience and with hope. He was lucky to be imprisoned when the conflict between the assembly and the president was coming to a head. He had not to choose between a reactionary parliament and a probably reactionary dictator. Proudhon made no point of political orthodoxy. He had always been sceptical of universal suffrage, and if the sight of millions of Frenchmen putting their destinies in the hands of Louis Napoleon disgusted him, it did not surprise him. He had not thought France ready for revolution in 1848; now it was obvious she was not; but having had to 'jump out of the first-floor window instead of coming downstairs one at a time', Proudhon was willing to make the best of a bad job. He saw clearly the dilemma in which the President found himself. On the one hand, Louis Napoleon had appealed to the conservative elements as the saviour of society; on the other, he had dissolved the assembly which had limited the right to vote, and was supposed to be preparing a monarchist restoration. All governments were alike to Proudhon, dangerous institutions, but the new one need not be any worse than the last. Let Louis Napoleon give proof that he was with the Revolution and his ambi-

tion, his broken oath, and the blood of December would be forgiven him. That proof, above all, lay in his religious policy. Proudhon was now a most determined anti-clerical. In 1847 he had replied to the ritual question asked of him when he was admitted as a Freemason. 'What does man owe to God?' by the startling answer 'War'; but not until the combination of the Church with the conservatives in 1848, did he resolve on war to the death against the clerical party. There were, in the Prince-President's circle, men as rigorously anti-clerical as Proudhon; notably Prince Napoleon. Through common friends, Proudhon kept in touch with the prince; he even visited him from time to time at the Palais Royal, to the horror of the exiles in London and Brussels, to whom the crime of the *coup d'état* was inexpiable. Proudhon refused to leave France; he refused, for instance, to take refuge in Sardinia. 'Who the devil,' he asked, 'expects enlightenment from Cagliari?' He refused a more tempting offer, for Albert Brisbane, the populariser of Fourier's doctrines in America, friend of all new ideas, and father of Mr. Hearst's chief leader-writer, wanted to bring Proudhon to New York. He was free in his denunciations of the allies of December 2, the 'sabre and the holy-water sprinkler'; but he believed he could make a bargain with the new rulers of France. He would devote himself exclusively to science 'with its *axioms*, its *determinations*, its *method*, its own certainty, a science which is neither mathematics nor jurisprudence, nor anything that is called science at present. . . . After economic science a *Philosophy of History* . . . and, later, a *General Philosophy*. . . . All this can be done in

France, in spite of despotism.' Proudhon hoped, above all, to get permission to start a journal in which he could assail the clericals and induce the new régime to move to the left, but he was too notorious and not tactful enough to be worth conciliating. His hopes were dashed again and again; he was told that the Jesuits were behind the refusal of permission; but he came to realise, slowly, that his days as a journalist were over. He had his living to make, and he was full of literary projects, among them being a *History of Democracy*, which remained a fragment. In the meantime, he put together a pot-boiler called *The Manual of the Stock Exchange Speculator*. Proudhon usually had the highest opinion of his books while he was writing them, but grew disillusioned after they were published; but he reversed this history in the case of the *Manual*. Most of it was the work of Duchêne, the former manager of *The People*, but, as the book sold well, Proudhon put his own name on the title-page of the third edition. The *Manual* is chiefly devoted to describing various companies then quoted on the Paris Bourse and has a limited interest to-day, but Proudhon was incapable of writing, or even of revising anything and not marking it with his personality. The *Manual* is a very characteristic work. Proudhon displays his scepticism about railways; his dislike of Saint-Simonists, who are both capitalists and Jews; his belief in the immense possibilities of mutuality and of the reform of credit; his hostility to the possibilities of monopoly working through railway rebates, and a rather pathetically optimistic belief in the future of co-operative societies of production as a step towards a

reformed society. His *Railway Reform* was a vigorous assault on the imperial policy of creating great vested interests in the railways by giving concessions. By leaving the railways too much freedom in fixing their charges, they are permitted to ruin water transport and then to plunder the defenceless public. He believed, however, that the growth of railways would lead to a decentralisation of industry and the decay of the great towns – a prediction in the spirit of his most distinguished disciple, Kropotkin. In any case, when the railways had completed their destructive work, the old methods of transport would come into their own!

Proudhon's hopes of founding a review were now vanishing and he had public and private motives to resent his enforced silence, for he had no regular income and he thought his market-value as a journalist was high. In any case, the Emperor was going over to the counter-revolution embodied in the Church. Proudhon almost despaired of the French; during the Crimean War he was ready to believe any bad news and sceptical about good news. The rapid progress of the industrial system in France under the Second Empire and the growth of speculation deceived this frivolous people into thinking it was well off. The national debt kept rising and the moral tone of the nation kept falling.

Bad temper and genuine indignation found a vent in the publication of Proudhon's greatest and most characteristic book. *Of Justice in the Revolution and the Church* was ostensibly provoked by a clerical journalist, Eugène de Mirecourt, who had published a brief sketch of Proudhon. Proudhon had a horror of any

intrusion into his private life, and he flattered himself that *he* never introduced any personal animus or scandal into his own writing. Mirecourt, indeed, could not find any serious flaws in Proudhon's morals, but, in any case, it was nobody's business if the revolutionary was a model husband and father. When Proudhon learned that it was to Cardinal Mathieu, the Archbishop of Besançon, that Mirecourt owed some of his information and that the Cardinal had attributed Proudhon's opinions to poverty and pride, his rage boiled over. A fellow-citizen of Franche-Comté had so far forgotten the obligations of that bond as to make Proudhon the victim of a Parisian scribbler! A reply to the Cardinal was begun, a reply which grew from a pamphlet into a book of over two thousand pages in which Proudhon repeated almost all he had said, but with a fervour and an eloquence that he had never equalled before. The main theme of the book is declared in the title, *Of Justice in the Revolution and the Church*. It is not merely a reply to Mirecourt or to the Cardinal; it is a declaration of war against the Church, a demonstration of the fundamental incompatibility of the teaching of the Church and the teaching of the Revolution.

What is the nature of this incompatibility? It lies in the place given to God in Catholic theology. Proudhon does not deny the existence of God; but he is hostile to any idea of God which makes human action depend on His action or which puts off to the next world the remedy for the injustices of this. The central achievement of the Revolution was that it brought down Justice from the sky to the earth. Where Christian teaching had stressed charity, an

idea involving more or less than Justice, the Revolution asserts that Justice is the greatest need of man — and that it is attainable. To look to God for aid in its achievement is to corrupt the essential truth that all men hunger after Justice before all other earthly goods; that Justice is immanent, not transcendental. Christianity obscures this truth. It has many merits; it is the only possible alternative to the rule of Justice; but whatever its services in the past, since the Revolution abolished government by divine right, *all* authorities depending on divine right, the Church, and even the state, substituting the divine right of the people for the divine right of the king, are condemned. They are a barrier in the way of progress, the realisation of Justice on earth, Justice revealed in mutual respect, in economic equality, and in the political equality that will follow from it.

Most writers would not take two thousand pages to assert these dogmas, and to illustrate them, but in the course of his argument, Proudhon is not hampered by relevance. He is able to attack communism, both in the form of early Christian communities and in that of the Fourierist phalanstery. The closest reasoning of Bentham may make him a great economist, but what avails that if he contemn Justice? But he is not content with attacking opinions; he forgets his own sound principles and assails persons. His outrageous assault on the memory of Heine shows him at his worst; and his ostentatious refusal to indulge in mere anti-clerical scandal-mongering did not last long. The wickedness of bishops who listen too readily to charges made against the morals of their clergy is stressed in one

place – and the truth of those charges asserted in another. The Cardinal is asked to be grateful that Proudhon does not dwell on ‘that bishop recently dead who became father to a whole company of national guards; nor on that parish priest who, to the sight and knowledge of his parishioners, had ten children by three women’. This moderation was not as well received as Proudhon professed to expect and, when he was asked for his authority, he had to write furiously to a friend that ‘the two cases were told me by a naval officer, or admiral, who was a witness of them in Spanish America or in Brazil, I don’t know which. . . . This is called *calumny*.’ As Proudhon had taken great pains to put his scandals on ‘this side of the Atlantic’, the charge of calumny was not ill-founded; and it is easy to imagine the fury with which any similar trick, played by Mirecourt, would have been received!

In addition to philosophy, economics, morals and scandals, Proudhon demonstrates his literary principles in *Justice*. They are not always consistent. Béranger is ranked above Pindar, David, Horace. At another time he is merely one of the greatest poets of the nineteenth century; at another he is very mediocre. Most of the leading contemporary French writers are relegated to inferior places because of their preoccupation with art, instead of with teaching. Didactic poetry is the only poetry worth writing or reading, so the future of Victor Hugo depends on his abandoning *La Légende des Siècles* for more pamphlets. The erotic novels of George Sand naturally come off badly; English literature has long been dead; French is now dead; but, not only in prose but

in poetry, French is the best of languages and literatures. That he had no qualifications for passing on the merits of German or English literature did not modify Proudhon's confidence.

Not only does Proudhon wander; some of his old faults of pointless logical jargon recur: ' $x$  being the average value of genius in the human being, possibly there will be found exceptional individuals whose genius equals  $x \times 2$ ; there are no geniuses equalling  $x \times 3$ .' 'If, in strength, man is to woman as 3 to 2; woman, in beauty, is in turn to man as 3 to 2.' Neither the argument for natural equality, the suspicions of any special claim for talent nor the firmly-rooted belief that equality between men does not involve equality between the sexes, are really helped by the intrusion of crude mathematical proportions in fields of judgment unfitted for them. More mathematics in his economics and less in his aesthetics and morals would have improved Proudhon's books!

If Proudhon's rivals reproached him with terrifying the middle classes by his association with the abolition of property, Proudhon was equally angry with those who gave ground for the belief that socialism and free love went together. For one thing, he had a low estimate of the importance of sexual love. It was one of the detestable fruits of the 'romantic scrofula' that love was made essential to marriage. Marriage had higher aims than the gratification of love or lust. Proudhon was very proud of his own chastity, a form of pride singular enough in the literary and reforming circles of that day. His own sexual passions do not seem to have been strong, and he had no sympathy with those whose passions were stronger. He

could do without love as he could do without tobacco, and the slaves of either of these bad habits had only to imitate him to their profit. On this subject he was never tired of preaching, preaching at its best worthy of Massillon, at its not infrequent worst, rather recalling the powerful articles of Mr. James Douglas. This enthusiasm for morality made Proudhon the victim of a celebrated hoax, for he was led to send a letter of advice to a female circus rider who was repenting an ill-spent life. The advice, if rigorous, was good, but in the Paris of that time the joke was thought even better – except by Proudhon, who was furious at the trick played on him.

In nothing was Proudhon's position more determinedly maintained than in his attacks on feminism. His passion for equality was limited. If there were races which could not be raised to the level of Frenchmen – let them disappear, but he did not want woman to disappear or to claim political or social equality with man. The outside world only reached a woman, in a properly constituted society, through her husband or father. She was always in tutelage, for she was in body and mind inferior to man. No doubt she had high qualities of her own which man could not imitate, but she reached them through man. In Paris corrupt through and through, where woman novelists were allowed to sap the foundations of morality and prostitutes flaunted the spoil that their keepers had stolen on the Stock Exchange, these healthy truths were neglected, but the traditional peasant view of woman's place was unflinchingly asserted by Proudhon and practised by him at home. He did not want

of his wife, or daughters, intellectual equality; he even thought religion a good thing in its place for a sex incapable of rising to the high conception of immanent Justice and of taking a place in the life of society in their own right.

This sexual conservatism did not save Proudhon from prosecution, for the drift of imperial policy from right to left had been interrupted by the attempt to murder the emperor made by Orsini. In the re-action that followed, Proudhon was a victim. *Justice* had had a great success; it was seized and its author prosecuted for 'attacks on public and religious morals . . . defence of crimes . . . attacks against the respect due to law . . . incitement of citizens to mutual hate and scorn . . . publication of false news.' He fought back by ingenious petitions to the Senate, but was condemned to three years imprisonment and 4,000 francs fine. His publisher got one month – and it proved a lesson to him. Appeals were useless, and Proudhon had to flee to Belgium, where he learned the hard lessons of life as an exile.

He settled down in Brussels in 1858, full of rage at his plight, although candid friends pointed out that he had his own violence of language to thank for it; it was folly to imagine that the imperial government would let pass so good a chance of conciliating the Church by sacrificing a pamphleteer who was as troublesome a friend as an enemy. The first troubles of the exile were financial. Garnier had learned his lesson. He would publish no more polemical works for Proudhon; literature, yes, but politics and economics, no! Proudhon had calculated on the profits of his books to free him from the constant

money worries that he had endured since he had left Lyons. Now he was cut off from his market. He could write more freely in Belgium than in France, but he could not reach the French public, or turn his writings into a means of livelihood. He suffered from constant catarrh, which he blamed on the Belgian climate; he objected to the high price of wine and to his forced addiction to beer. Moreover, he made enemies in Belgium. He preached against centralisation, thus annoying the politicians of Brussels; he, the great anti-clerical, poured scorn on the Belgian liberals, saying he preferred the Catholic party; and, if in France he was always attacking the naïve pride of his countrymen, he made it clear to his Belgian hosts that France was still at the head of civilisation. Events were moving fast in France – and in the direction that Proudhon had advocated. The Emperor decided, in 1859, to make war on Austria to free Italy. It was a swerve to the left, to the party of the Revolution and it was so regarded by observers on both sides. The left rejoiced; the right grew more and more suspicious, for any upset of the *status quo* in Italy could only harm the Pope. Proudhon refused to believe in the war; he refused to believe in French victories; he refused to rejoice in them; and the world was soon treated to the spectacle of the great revolutionary praising the work of the Congress of Vienna; casting cold water on the idea of Italian nationality; regretting the triumphs of Garibaldi; abusing Mazzini; burning all the idols of the democratic party in Europe. He asked, in the spirit of a modern French royalist, what was the gain for France in creating another great power on her

southern frontier and abandoning the great political asset of being the hereditary protector of the Pope? He added to his crimes by asserting that Austria and Russia were truly progressive countries and by attacking Poland. At that time, an ill-informed and sentimental sympathy for Poland was as much the mark of a good radical as ill-informed and sentimental hostility to Poland was the mark of a good modern radical – until 1933. Poland, said Proudhon, was an aristocratic republic, which died of her own vices; it should not be revived at the expense of the future freedom of Russia. Russia, under an enlightened Tsar, is capable of progress; Catholic Poland is not. The scandal caused was immense; here was a lost leader indeed, but worse was to come when the apostle of Justice preached the right of force in the last of his great treatises, *War and Peace*.

The argument of this lengthy essay on international law is simple enough. The great good of human society is equilibrium as a consequence of the rule of justice, but force has its rights, which have to be allowed for before a just equilibrium can be reached. Moreover, in war man develops his personality and learns indispensable lessons of social organisation: there are passages to the glory of war which would be in place in a speech by Herr von Papen, and Proudhon, who had attacked his fellow-radicals for their jingoism, appeared as a defender of war when, at long last, the French left parties were turning pacifist! It is true that the age of war is asserted to be over, that 'war, for every attentive mind, has held its last assize from '92 to 1815. . . . The constitutional system, expression of the politics of interest, corollary

of the famous treaties of 1815, have given it notice to quit. . . . Cursed then be the nation which, forgetting herself, shall ask from war what only science, work and liberty can give.' But the conclusions of the book are not altogether in accordance with its spirit. In his enthusiasm for the ordeal by battle, Proudhon becomes a victim of what Mr. J. B. S. Haldane has called 'Bayardism'. He objects to strategy and deceit in war. The object of battle is to discover which of the two parties to a dispute is the stronger. If, by a stratagem or trick the less strong side wins, the whole object of war is nullified, since what matters is the relative strength and a victory of the weaker side over the stronger is a deplorable falsification of judgment.

*War and Peace* is a natural pendant of *Justice*; it is an attempt to discover how, in fact, rights have been created in the past. That much of what we take to be our national rights has been created by war; that force has rights as well as possession; are truths that sentimental democrats sometimes neglect, but, as usual, Proudhon was better in criticism than in construction, and his picture of honourable war giving place in the new society to equally honourable forms of peaceful competition, is decidedly Utopian.

His exile came to an end in a most characteristic way. Having refused to take advantage of an imperial amnesty, Proudhon was living in Brussels in a dignified exile, when an article which he had written seemed to advocate the annexation of Belgium to France. The Freemasons, according to Proudhon, were at the bottom of the agitation which made Belgium too hot to hold him, for he opposed the

evacuation of Rome by the French garrison. Whatever the cause, he hurriedly took refuge in France on December 17, 1862; his wanderings were over and his doctrine, in the main, complete.

He had been an indefatigable writer during his exile and had had the triumph of winning a prize offered by the Swiss Canton of Vaud for the best essay on taxation. That the free Swiss, that a state should thus honour the exile, delighted him, and illustrated again the folly of the French. According to Proudhon taxation is simply the share each citizen has to pay of the cost of providing state services. The state, like any individual or corporation, ought to sell its services at cost price. Of these services some citizens will use a bigger share than others, the rich will get more than the poor, so ought to pay more. But, although an income tax seems just at first sight, it is added to the cost of goods, and so is spread over the community, like an ordinary tax on consumption. He attacks a progressive income tax as tyrannical and futile, for all taxes become indirect taxes on consumption, the 'result is zero'. A tax on land values, even if the state took only a third of the revenue from this source, would pay all legitimate expenses of government. In a well-organised state, government services should not be more than a tenth of the gross revenue of the community, but until that happy deflation of the state is achieved, most taxes should be left alone for most reforms are fictitious! There can be no real justice in taxation in a society which permits economic inequality, there is the root of the matter. There are, of course, obvious improvements to be made in detail; the duties on wines should

be reduced, but those on tobacco kept, (Proudhon was fond of wine and a non-smoker); houses should be taxed, so as to break up the great towns. It was, indeed, an eminently conservative essay; apart from its hostility to state action and its hints of equality as a remedy, there is nothing in it to alarm the most timid.

One other work of this last period showed Proudhon's resolute independence, for living by his pen, he attacked the claims for perpetual or lengthy copyright made by his fellow-authors, with a zeal more natural, as Émile Faguet says, in a publisher than in an author. *Literary Entails* is, if not of first-class importance as a contribution to the theory of property in ideas, at least worthy of Proudhon's spirit. Indeed, he repeatedly gave proofs of disinterestedness of a more immediately practical type than his assault on copyright. With the ending of his journalistic career, his means of livelihood became very limited. He thought of going back to business, but that project came to nothing. He worked for a projected railroad, but the concession went by favour, and Proudhon refused compensation for his lost time. His own health and that of his wife and children was not good, and serious privation, if not actual starvation, came very close. He hoped to be able to give his two surviving daughters *dots*, but, should they have to fend for themselves, they would have the benefit of a severe training; they were to expect everything from work, nothing from favour. When they were still children of about ten, he saw signs in them of 'dissipation, vanity and impertinence' – vices to be stamped out and when well-meaning friends sent them too

handsome Christmas presents they were rebuked for spoiling them! But Proudhon was equally severe on himself, and was hurt by gifts of wine from admirers, gifts he insisted on paying for and, if he underestimated the risks run by lenders, he may have forgotten that not all men had his horror of debt or his zeal in repaying money only borrowed under the pressure of dire necessity!

In his final years, Proudhon again attempted to lead the workers of Paris into the true revolutionary path. Having made embittered enemies in the past by his willingness to co-operate with the empire, he now led the movement for rigid abstention from political life as long as the imperial administration falsified the working of universal suffrage. He wished the party of the Revolution to protest against the system by abstaining from voting or by casting blank ballot papers. The election of deputies was a tacit approval of the imperial régime and, as candidates had to take an oath to the Emperor, the crime either of perjury or of treason to the revolutionary cause, was made inevitable. To active politicians, anxious to maintain a united front against the government party, Proudhon was as big a nuisance as he had been in 1848 for he never wrote better than he did in his protest of the *Non-Juring Democrats*, and in his advocacy of a declaration of political independence by the working-classes, the *Manifesto of the Sixty*, a claim for working-class representation, a denial of the representative character of the bourgeois radicals. He left, in his last completed work, *The Political Capacity of the Working-Classes*, an exposition of the same theme. The Revolution had torn the worker out of a

stratified society; it had placed him opposite the bourgeoisie. What does this class of wage earners bring to the problems of state? It brings a solution of the problem of justice and equality; the magic formula of mutuality will solve the economic problem, not communism: federalism will solve the political problem, not the fantasies of the professional democrats with their parliaments and armies of voters.

But if the working-class is called to a consciousness of its mission, it is preached at as well as praised. Its fondness for strikes is vigorously attacked, and so are the outrageous claims of the trade unions to interfere with workshop management! An alliance with the bourgeoisie is advocated; and the workers are reminded that they have been too busy with their own wrongs to understand the sorrows of the middle classes. Only a working-class whose moral character frees them from mere passion can live up to its mission.

The last formal message of the great contradictor was thus harmony, but Proudhon did not live to see the book through the press. He died on January 19, 1865. The imperial government, anxious to frighten the Church, permitted Proudhon's funeral to be made a great anti-clerical demonstration, but sent the publisher and printer of his posthumous *Annotated Gospels* to prison, a contradiction worthy of Proudhon himself.

## CHAPTER V

### THE INFLUENCE OF PROUDHON

If there are real inconsistencies in Proudhon's work – and there are not a few – there are more apparent ones. His temper was too hot; he wrote too much under the influence of immediate events; and these events gave his prophetic powers the lie too often; for him to escape having to curse what he had blessed and to bless what he had cursed. He judged events, and men, by their fitness to aid in the work of the Revolution and his judgment of what *would* aid the Revolution was too easily affected by irrelevant circumstances of personal importance. He was, in short, a man, not a thinking machine. But he was fundamentally very consistent, although he concealed his consistency under verbal extravagances. He grew, it is true, more conservative as he grew older, less scornful of bourgeois virtues once he had become a bourgeois himself, and more inclined to scepticism of the virtues of a populace which paid so little attention to the advice he gave it. Then his refusal to understand what his opponents meant sometimes had surprising results. To read in *War and Peace* that even 'if production is doubled, population will not be long in being doubled in its turn, which means there is no change' – and to reflect that this pessimism comes from a writer who used the name of

Malthus as a term of abuse, is to suspect inconsistencies. But Proudhon had never been really very far away from Malthus; it was the inequality of working the law of population in the present society, not its truth, that he had attacked.

The most common cause of his apparent variations was his spirit of contradiction. He may not have been the Mephistopheles which Mazzini called him, but he was certainly a denier. What was usually a temperamental reluctance to agree with the truths or falsehoods in common circulation, was erected by Proudhon into a system of dialectic; he pushed, he asserted, a thesis to its ultimate conclusion, then rebuilt on a sound foundation what he had destroyed. Thus he annihilated property and then gave it a real life in the form of mutuality. Sometimes this explanation covers the facts, sometimes it does not. Any assertion was likely to provoke Proudhon to contradiction and to violent contradiction at that, but, at heart, he was moderate, conservative in almost all matters, sceptical of fundamental improvements in human life and willing to take half a loaf, or even less, as an instalment of justice. Out of his *pros* and *cons* it is possible to construct any number of systems – and impossible to explain the whole of human institutions and social history. Proudhon is a quarry, not one of the rival symmetrical buildings for the future residence of mankind that are declared to have been built by Marx; and, consequently, Proudhon, other difficulties apart, could not compete with Marx as a founder of a school. Indeed, he resembled such preachers of genius as Cobbett and Péguy, (in substance as well as in form), rather than

system-makers like Marx. Proudhon's influence was considerable, but it was the influence of his spirit rather than of any consistent body of doctrine that made him important in the history of revolutionary Europe in the years following his death.

There is one possible exception to this view of Proudhon's importance. He was, as Kropotkin said 'the father of anarchy'. The anarchists at least preserved his memory and circulated his writings; as was fitting, for anarchy, as a positive doctrine of free order, was formulated by him.

The immediate connection between Proudhon and anarchy as a movement was furnished by Bakunin, who was lavish in praise of his master and developed some of the Proudhonian theses with a rigour which was foreign to the essentially compromising spirit of their author. In the First International, the cleavage between the anarchists and the Marxists seemed to carry an old quarrel beyond the grave and, dead, Proudhon's name was powerful enough to serve as a rallying cry for the enemies of the authoritarian doctrines of Marx. On this rock, indeed, the International split; and there seemed for a time to be a chance that the socialist movement would remain sundered by the doctrinal differences of the communist and anarchist schools. The Commune of Paris was, in verbal form, a Proudhonian rising. His ideas were powerful in giving to the patriotic and social indignation of the Parisian workers, a federalist form; and the commemoration of the martyrs of the 'Wall of the Federalists' is a tribute to one side of Proudhon's teaching. On the other hand, the orthodox Marrian criticism of the tactics of the Communards

is severe on the part played by Proudhon's disciples; their lower middle class superstitions about right and legality, it is asserted, ruined whatever chance of success the revolt had.

The crushing of the Commune drove anarchist propaganda underground; and, when it was able to come out into the open again, the field had been occupied by the orthodox socialists. To the French anarchists, Marxian leaders like Guesde and Lafargue were deceiving the workers, leading them into the old political paths where they had been led and betrayed by the men of 1848. Despite energetic leaders, the anarchist agitation, moving far from the ideas of the later Proudhon, failed to win a permanent place for itself. There was some truth in the Marxist criticism of the followers of Proudhon in the First International that they were mostly workers in the Paris luxury trades, parasites – as their enemies insisted – on the capitalist society they professed to wish to destroy. Indeed, Proudhon was never closely in touch with the new industrial proletariat. Apart from vague syndicalist solutions, he had little to say to the worker who was not a possible peasant proprietor or possible master of his own workshop. He did not like, and did not understand, large-scale industry; and he had, by his hostility to strikes, left the workers in such industries helpless until the far-distant date when the present system should have been replaced. Naturally enough, the men who were in revolt against the wrongs of the system of industry, which was daily strengthening its hold on society, could hardly be expected to wait on the ultimate deliverance of the Proudhonian revolution, and went

over to Marxian socialism or to a more active anarchy, to 'propaganda by the deed'. In his youth, Proudhon himself had dreamed of a wild justice exercised by a select and virtuous minority who should punish the innumerable unpunished crimes of the present social order but although his temper occasionally boiled up, he became more sceptical of the merits of this private punishment, and he devoted a part of *Justice* to confuting the defenders of tyrannicide. It was not enough that the tyrant should deserve death; the assassin himself should, morally, be above reproach, and in a corrupt society, where are such men to be found? Where in sixteenth-century Italy would you find a man worthy to slay a Borgia? Moreover, tyrannicide is as likely to find its victims among the worthy as among the unworthy. William the Silent and Henri Quatre were victims not of bad men, but of good men, of saints indeed! So high a standard of political morality was incompatible with a good deal of later anarchist activity, with murders and robberies committed by men who were less than perfect, by men who were scornful of bourgeois morality; and it is unfair to both sides to make Proudhon the inspirer of Vaillant or Ravachol.

The eclipse of Proudhon seemed complete by the end of the nineteenth century, except in an anarchist movement of decreasing practical importance. The orthodox French socialists were inclined to remember Proudhon's indiscipline in the crisis of 1848, and spokesmen for Marxian doctrines were patronising, if not hostile, to the untamed genius who had misled the French workers for so many years.

It was a new generation that restored Proudhon

to his pride of place. The inevitable revolution was less imminent in 1890 than in 1880. Ten years had been given the old order by a zealot in 1880; the ten years had elapsed; the revolution was now far off – and revolutionary zeal had cooled off. Socialists sent to parliament as a means of propaganda, were beginning to demonstrate the psychological truth later to be formulated by Robert de Jouvenel. ‘There is more in common between two members of parliament, one of whom is a revolutionary, than between two revolutionaries, one of whom is a member of parliament.’ Millerand, who had used Proudhonian arguments against the Bank of France, came to represent the compromising necessities of parliamentary politics. In his speech at Saint-Mandé in 1896, he repeated the side-tracking of the Revolution against which Proudhon had protested in 1848; when he entered the cabinet to ‘defend the republic’, the parallel with the ‘Jacobins’ of fifty years before was evident. The republic was saved, socialist discipline improved, and politics and party unity, twin evils against which Proudhon had protested, seemed enthroned. But events fought for Proudhonian ideas. The old order was not dying easily. The concentration of property in a few hands had not gone far enough to create, automatically, a unified working-class, ready to expropriate the expropriators. The Dreyfus case had shown that there was life in the old liberal doctrines of the rights of man; that the principles of the French Revolution were still thought to be worth fighting about.

The idea of a working-class, conscious of its mission, not tied to any academic orthodoxy, but creating its

own weapons of combat and spontaneously producing its own leaders, suspicious of state socialism and of party creeds, found its vehicle in the syndicalist movement and its prophet in Georges Sorel.

Against the current superstitions, Sorel declared war. He attacked the 'unlimited confidence in the economic capacities of the state'. 'The democrats allow themselves to be trapped by dialectic . . . academic manipulations of abstractions inspire them with an extreme confidence because such exercises serve to deceive the people which does not understand what it is being led to applaud.' The Marxian class war was asserted to be an intellectual construction and its preachers thought themselves free from any obligation to explain further what they meant by it in a given situation.

Sorel was an enthusiastic and influential advertiser of Proudhon, but he was himself, in his intuitionist philosophy, opposed to the formal rationalism of Proudhon. But in his insistence on the value of ideas worked out, for the workers by the workers, he is in the spirit of *The Political Capacity of the Working-Class*. Proudhon would, probably, have been less indifferent to the 'mythical' character of the general strike; less willing to let the workers test their will-power without a cool examination of the forces they would have to combat, not all of them forces which could be altered by a mere effort of willing – however hard! But in the insistence of Sorel and his disciples on effort; on the refusal to await the inevitable working of history; in the insistence on the rôle of the will in society; the apostles of syndicalism were in the line of descent from Proudhon.

Other theses of Proudhon gained, from the necessities of the time, a more respectful hearing than had seemed likely when the first Marxian wave swept over France. The insight into the feelings of the French peasant, which was one of Proudhon's chief assets, was justified by the increasing scepticism with which mere industrial socialism was preached to peasants, who were not in the least anxious to destroy property, as long as they had a chance of acquiring some themselves. Proudhon had declared that no one who knew the French peasant would think of trying to communise him and, indeed, there is hardly any less tractable human raw material for orthodox communism than a French peasant hoping to become a *kulak*. As a preacher of 'socialism for peasants', Proudhon became respectable in French socialist circles and his violent hostility to collectivism was forgotten or watered down. The war, the Russian Revolution and the establishing of party orthodoxy of the kind Proudhon detested, have again eclipsed Proudhon. It is true that, in a gallant attempt to find a common ground, French Socialist orators appeal to the doctrines of Proudhon, but as they also appeal to the doctrines of Saint-Simon and are reluctant to abandon their claims on Marx, the value of this praise is not great. Needless to say, the regular communists in France pay not even lip service to the great heretic whose economic doctrine is the 'New Economic Policy' made permanent and whose hostility to revolutions, run from a safe distance by professional leaders, would certainly not be diminished by the assertion that there was an infallible party in Moscow on the job, in the place of his old enemies, the London

exiles! Proudhon had, if not a sceptical, a suspicious mind, and that would have been enough to disqualify him as a good party member.

Proudhon was, indeed, too various a writer to be a good founder of a school. Syndicalists, anarchists, royalists, have all been able to find support for their views somewhere in Proudhon. None of these schools can claim the whole of Proudhon and, as far as he has a spiritual heir, it is Mr. Belloc whose 'distributism' expresses perfectly the essential economic doctrine of Proudhon. To spread property in fairly even doses, over most of the community; to regard equality in separate property rights, not in common property rights, as the goal to be aimed at; and to be sceptical about the forms of production which are not easily reduced to individual equal property holdings are Proudhonian remedies for social evils, as they are those of Mr. Belloc and the violent anti-clericalism of Proudhon's later life must not blind us to the degree in which he represented French tradition. He said, indeed, that there was not enough religion in France to make the country Protestant, but he had in fact little or no sympathy with the Reformation. In his views of the family, of the place of woman, of sexual morals and of the rationality of the universe, he might have agreed with his clerical enemies – if only they would have agreed to put immanent Justice in the place of God and the Revolution in the place of the Bible and the Church!

It is as a representative of the French peasant and worker that Proudhon is of first-rate importance. His passion for equality; his suspicion of any bonds imposed on the individual, even in the flattering

form of a doctrine of fraternity or of association; his ingrained suspicion of superior people, whether their superiority is based on wealth, birth, or dogmatic infallibility; his willingness to sacrifice immediate material gains for ideal satisfactions; his devotion to principles rather than palpable 'reforms' as the motive of his political action; all are commonplaces of French life. In his suspicion of authorities of all kinds; in his conviction that they are almost always wrong; in his realisation that if the state (or the party) is made powerful, its power will be used for the rulers always – and often against the ruled; Proudhon is a good radical and the radical is the typical Frenchman. In his fondness for violent extremes of language, covering what is often moderate or even timid thought, Proudhon is again a typical French radical. He is willing to compromise, in fact if not in words; he even offers at the end of his great polemic against the Church, to make a bargain with it! But on one subject he was never ready to compromise; he would never abandon his belief that Justice was not only the first of goods, but was attainable. He would have scorned the moral pessimism of the practical politician or of his apologists, with their belief that since the rich are sure to plunder the community, the best the political agents of the poor can do for their clients is to get a meagre share of the spoil. Such a doctrine may keep alive the party machine; it may invite the ingenuous apologetic of 'Alain'; but it would not be good enough for Proudhon. He would have had Lazarus starve rather than let him be bought off by crumbs from the rich man's table. Such scepticism he detested. 'When doubt, secretly

awakened in the souls of men, strikes Justice: when man comes to regard laws and institutions as bonds imposed by force or necessity, but without roots in his conscience; when in presence of social defects, incredulity shakes religion, then society is done for; it is on the way to decadence and can only recover by a revolution. No one says to himself that there are mistakes in the established order, inadequacy in recognised rights, that the ideas behind the laws must be rectified, the formulas corrected, that men must set themselves bravely in search of truth and Justice, enduring the while, with resignation and devotion, the effect of evil institutions. . . . No one has faith any longer in the legislator or in men; men say to themselves, as did Brutus, that human nature is corrupt, that Justice is but a word, since experience has shown her to be unequal, contradictory and there is no security that she will become better. Men see in the state henceforward, simply an arbitrary constitution, which profits only the ambitious and the cunning; men see in religion only a conjuring trick, an instrument of despotism. Every man keeps to himself, the good virtuously, the bad, and the men of no faith, selfishly. . . . Society has passed insensibly from Justice to despair.'

Nearly seventy years have passed since Proudhon foresaw the modern dilemma as a moral dilemma, as a crisis in faith. He set up the banner of Justice as one to which all men of good will should rally; as a standard by which faiths, religious and political, should be tested. It is an unfashionable banner and the faith Proudhon preached seems to have even fewer adherents in our time than it had in his. It

may be that his truth was fiction; that the surrender of a belief in ethical values transcending the economic structure and the class struggle and the surrender of liberty into the hands of individuals or parties, remotely responsible, if at all, to the multitudes that they rule, are inevitable phenomena of historical development. But in the making of the brave new worlds of Russia and Italy, sacrifices of truths (or of illusions) have been made that Proudhon would have thought ill-compensated for by punctual trains or abundant tractors. What value this nostalgia for the illusions of '89 may have is a matter of opinion, but no one who is sure he can separate Justice and Revolution, Justice and Society, will find much of value in Proudhon.

## B I B L I O G R A P H Y

The chief source for the life of Proudhon is his *Correspondence* published in fourteen volumes after his death; more recent publications have added to this mass of letters and others, still unpublished, are known to exist. Proudhon's works were published after his death and in 1923 a new and admirable edition was begun under the editorship of MM. Bouglé and Moysset. This edition, very fully annotated, is indispensable, but it is as yet only half-finished. Some of Proudhon's works have been translated into English under anarchist auspices: the first two, *Memoirs on Property* in 1876 and *The System of Economic Contradictions* in 1888, by Benjamin Tucker. *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century* was translated by John Beverley Robinson in 1923. The chief works of Proudhon are:

<i>First Memoir on Property</i>	1840
<i>Letter to M. Blanqui</i>	1841
<i>Warning to Proprietors</i>	1842
<i>The Creation of Order</i>	1843
<i>The System of Economic Contradictions</i>	1846
<i>The Confessions of a Revolutionary</i>	1849
<i>The General Idea of the Revolution</i>	1851
<i>The Manual of the Stock Exchange Speculator</i>	1853
<i>Of Justice in the Revolution and the Church</i>	1858
<i>War and Peace</i>	1861
<i>The Federative Principle</i>	1863
<i>The Political Capacity of the Working-Classes</i>	1865 (posthumous)